as icarus loved the sun (too close, too much)

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by fizzyren

Summary

Roronoa Zoro is sent to a foreign kingdom as an alpha offering for the vessel of the Sun God.

But something isn't quite right. Enshrouded in mystery, there is a glaring problem:

Every alpha sent to the Sun God Nika is killed within the week they arrive.

Notes

I am soooo nervous but excited to start this crazy journey with you guys!! I hope you enjoy!

I have a very clear vision of where this fic is headed, so don't worry, I'm already working on the story and have chapters 2 and 3 completed. This fic will be updated monthly for now or until I am able to get a faster writing schedule started.

Tags and rating will be updated as chapters are added (and as I remember small things). Please be aware this fic will eventually become rated EXPLICIT and will also feature MCD (not Zoro or Luffy).

Take with a grain of salt, this work is NOT beta'd but I tried my best to reread through this and tweak the punctuation and grammar and misspellings as I found them.

ZORO REFERENCE || LUFFY REFERENCE

Chapter 1: I

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It is the day of his reckoning.

The Big Day.

The day that he will be stripped of his home, his safety, his pride, and shipped away to a lord playing God for the measly favor of Zoro's house and a hefty dowry.

Zoro must do his best to not growl at the attendants that scrub every inch of his skin. The small hands and warm, sudsy water with ragged cloth that violate each nook and cranny of his body.

The outdoor hot springs serve as the baths for the entire village, walls of bamboo that are woven together to provide privacy screens separating the individual pools. A central building runs along the length of the pools, for people to come in and out, and at the very end of the baths are the larger pools. These are reserved for the higher officials, the chief and his family, or for sacrificial alphas to be scrubbed down like a mutt.

He stands there patiently and allows them preen over him, scrub him until he is fresher than he was as a newborn and he is swathed in oils and perfume, meticulously rubbed and massaged into his skin until he is gleaming golden and the tone of his muscles under his skin are defined.

His hair is cropped short, green trimmed hair falling into the steaming water below and carried away by the gentle current. It no longer touches his neck, no longer teases the tops of his ears. He'd not been one to grow his hair out very long, but the fact they deem him needing to crop it shorter is annoying, likely done for nothing other than someone else's personal aesthetics.

His fangs are shined, an attendant that pulls his mouth open and scrubs him with a brush over every tooth and his tongue until he finally gags and turns his head away with a grumble.

His wrists and ankles adorned with warm gold, studded earrings and small hoops to fill the rest of his piercing holes with, body chains that lay thin and tantalizing on his chest and shoulders and back. He clinks and rattles with every step he takes, every lift of his arm, every turn of his head.

Zoro stares ahead blankly, watches the cracks on the mud packed walls of the pavilion and wishes they'd grow bigger and splinter and bring this whole place down to rubble. He maintains his arms out and slightly elevated so the tittering little pests that continue to poke and touch and pull have room to get around him.

The final piece of it all is the collar. Brought in only while the servants are carefully draping him with white silk, crisscrossing and cinched on his body in a way that he could not possibly remove the full garment unless he had someone helping him or he ripped it to shreds.

The gold collar locks around his throat and the metal is heavy but warm. He finds himself growling, a low warning in his chest when he hears the *snick* of a lock behind him. The small hands hesitate around him, wary of him even as an obedient alpha. He is still an alpha, and still a predator, these chains and shackles are nothing if not attached to anything.

“Your– The Solaris will be the one to remove the collar for you. The key will be sent to him immediately,” a small, meek voice behind him says.

When Zoro turns to glare at whoever it is, presumably the same one that locked him in, he notices the meek small attendant standing there, red in the face. Behind them is the skittering back of another, halfway out the room already with the key. Zoro makes eyes with him before he hears the attendant squeak and rush from the entryway, footsteps retreating down the halls.

He can’t help the sigh that rushes from his lungs. This is absolutely ridiculous. Fuck traditions and pleasing the old geezers that cling to their safe old ways. The fact that he is being offered as a *prize* is demoralizing, an insult. He is nothing more than a breeding stud sent off for a hefty chunk of money.

He knows next to nothing about where he is going to, aside from being sent to the Sun God’s kingdom across the country. He knows that there it is hot, scorching, dry, surrounded by sand and rocky cliff sides that drop off into more sandy desert. The sun shines every day of the year and the kingdom is a glorified theocracy. Worshiping the sun. False idols, power hungry priests, naive lambs of the common people. A *cult*.

Zoro hardly paid attention to his social studies. And now he is regretting it, wishing maybe he had not slept so much in the back of class…

He will be sent off like cattle, offered to the church as a bull, likely found to be too unruly and then sent to execution as a blood sacrifice for their phony god.

Zoro glares at himself in the mirror.

He couldn’t fight this anyway. He was an orphan, he didn’t belong to this kingdom either. He didn’t belong anywhere. Was it only right that the family that took him in sent him first as a sacrifice so that they may be at peace for a bit longer?

“Roronoa Zoro. Come.”

Shit. When did *he* get here?

Mihawk stands in the open doorway, scowling in his direction. Something bitter twists in Zoro’s chest.

The servants easily scatter away from him when he turns around. Whether they were done with him or not, he will gladly take the excuse to get away from them. As he makes it halfway across the room, Mihawk turns and exits, obviously expecting Zoro to follow.

Mihawk isn’t particularly dressed up for the occasion. Casual trousers and a blouse, long wine red coat that sways at his ankles as he walks, boots softly clacking against the wood of the pavilion as he walks them out of the springs bathhouse. Hell, he’s even forgone the large sword that he typically keeps on his back, though Zoro is certain the man has at least six different blades concealed on his person at this very moment.

Zoro feels cold despite the layers he has on, the warmth of the metal on his skin from the jewelry, the comfort of his mentor. It feels like a betrayal. Did Mihawk have a say in this? Zoro doesn’t want to think about it: Mihawk complacently sitting in a room with the mountain’s elders, saying nothing as they agree to ship Zoro off. Or worse, if he *had* agreed to it.

They don't stop until they have reached the courtyard just outside of the building, surrounded by the hush of rustling leaves, running water of the fountains around them, a calm breeze that kicks up the scent of the grasses and evergreens.

Mihawk suddenly turns to him, looking very serious. More serious than he usually does. Zoro eyes him warily, but waits, at attention, bated breath.

Mihawk extends his hand, palm up. In his grasp is more gold. An earring, or rather a set. A dainty curve of a cuff with elegant drops of gold that dangle from it when Zoro warily picks it up to take a closer look. There's three of them that dangle from the cuff.

"Were it up to me, I would be giving you a sword instead but it would not travel well with your entourage," Mihawk watches him as he inspects the earring, like he is careful in the words he chooses, "It isn't much."

Zoro is surprised at the sudden emotional display. The man might as well have claimed that he would miss Zoro greatly after he was gone. He can feel it, in the space between his words and his breaths. Somehow, that makes this feel even worse. Scary.

This man has taught him many things, been a mentor and father-figure that Zoro had not dared to wish for, but now aches to be leaving. Mihawk taught him to fight, taught him his manners, taught him just about everything aside from the actual classes he spent with tutors.

Zoro does not wait to take out the gilded stud and smaller hoops in his left ear, replacing it with Mihawk's gift. His promise.

"Thank you," he says, feeling embarrassed by the words. He means them though. And he gets a feeling that this is a goodbye of sorts. That he might never see Mihawk again after this. They are putting him into a carriage tomorrow morning before the sun comes up so that they can make the long trip south. Some bullshit about honoring the ritual of the Sun as it dances across the sky.

"Be strong. You will find me again."

Mihawk's hand on his shoulder is nothing more than a pressure above the linens. Zoro wishes he could feel the warmth of his palm because he couldn't dare hope for something more like a hug.

A thousand words get caught under his tongue. Why me? Why now? What will happen to you after this? What will happen to *me*?

Everything was so fast, only three days ago was he told that he will leave his life here and become a sacrificial alpha for the proclaimed vessel of the Sun God. Not much was told to him about why other than the Lord was young, an omega, and highly revered by the country and church of the kingdom.

Nika.

This is the only name he knows now and the name that will be his shackles.

He will be the Alpha of Nika. A trophy.

Hurried footsteps clatter down the walkway in their direction, preceding a calling, “LORD ZORO WHERE–! O-Oh, L-Lord Mihawk. Greetings.”

A flushed, pale attendant stands at the entrance of the courtyard, nervous eyes darting between the two alphas. Her head bows low when Mihawk stares at her in warning and acknowledgement. She continues, brave or determined, Zoro isn’t sure.

“Lord Zoro. The Master is calling for you. Please–” She shifts nervously, and Zoro can see her eyes darting around behind the fall of her bangs. He’ll commend her for holding her tongue and keeping her eyes low. *Come with me right away*, he picks up easily enough. He can tell she is eager to rush over and grab Zoro by the hems and drag him away. Mihawk is throwing her off, surely.

Sighing, Zoro will not make her suffer any longer than necessary. He gives Mihawk a glance, hands him over the earrings he had taken off, hands lingering, aching to not be taken away from his mentor, and offers a courteous bow of his head. The only alpha that Zoro will bow his head to.

“Take care, Mihawk. I hope to see you again…”

After a moment of walking, they arrive at the great hall. Zoro drags his feet as much as he can all the way there, looking carefully through every window and pavilion and hut they pass, trying to soak in the memory of this place. The green of the trees and nature of the mountain side, vibrant forests of bamboo that grow thick as they near the great hall.

Their walk takes them out of the cobbled hallways of the palace and out into the gravel pathways that lead to the more common straw-thatched buildings of the village. Closer out towards the mountain, deeper into the lush green of the forest.

The great hall is a humble wooden platform, open at all four sides to allow the cool mountain breeze through. The wooden pillars that are at each corner of the roofing are dark and intricate carved into florals and natural patterns. The bamboo here is at its thickest and on the back three sides of the hall it is so thick that they essentially act as walls themselves.

Shimotsuki Koushirou, the chief of Shimotsuki village, is seated in the middle of the wooden platform at the head of the table, posture relaxed as he sits in a lotus position, eyes closed and likely meditating in the quiet. There are four other elders here that Zoro recognizes as well, flanked two by two on either side of the wooden table that holds an assortment of tea cups, plates with nuts and lotus seeds, and a few scrolls of paper.

There are a handful of servants just outside of the hall lined up side by side, hands folded in front of them, heads ducking as Zoro approaches them with a reverence he has never been given in this place beforehand. He climbs the steps with growing agitation, clinking of the gold on his ankles announcing him to the council before him before he can say anything.

“Sit.” The younger man of the elders, in his late 70s if Zoro remembers, gestures loosely at the empty cushion just across from Shimotsuki.

Zoro narrows his eyes but does so, uncaring of the silk around his knees and legs when he kneels. He maintains a strong posture. An alpha at attention. He will not sit to be relaxed or meditate. He

will make it known that he is uncomfortable here.

He can smell the distaste of the elders around him and he must keep his hands tightly curled against his hips to keep from smiling about it.

Good, he thinks snidely, chin held up, shoulders back, resent me, hate me. Keep me as an ashen memory in your minds, a bitter taste.

“Zoro. You will be sent off at the break of dawn,” Shimotsuki finally opens his eyes to look at Zoro when he talks. Cold, emotionless eyes. Always uncaring.

Zoro stares back at him, just as numb and emotionless. He will not give him his anger, his fear, his resentment. His fists clench against his hips where he rests them in his lap, regardless.

“There will be an entourage that will guide you until you arrive in the New World. You will bring nothing but what you have now. You will not speak until Nika speaks to you. You will *behave* yourself so as to not disgrace us.”

Zoro thinks of his belongings in his room, where they will end up, his swords that he has trained endlessly with. He supposes he could entrust them to Kuina…

One of the elders clears his throat to get his attention before adding, “Make no mistake, Roronoa. This is for the sake of the princess.”

Ah. So that’s really what this is about.

Sending him so that they do not have to send Kuina instead. If he thinks about it. He’s okay with that. She would no doubt hit him over the head for voicing that out loud.

How convenient that they have not included her in this meeting. Zoro can only imagine the earful she gave the elders upon learning they would be sending Zoro in her stead. A nameless, orphaned alpha to protect the dignity of the mountain’s soon to be alpha queen.

“You will obey his every word. Every frivolous whim. Every violent action you will take with a lowered head.”

A trophy. A *toy*. Zoro clenches his jaw, biting his tongue.

The oldest of the elders, wrinkled and frail, eyes clouded blind with cataracts, faces Zoro directly as if his vision is as clear as ever, and raises a wrinkly, knobby knuckled hand to his forehead and then extends it, palm out, towards Zoro with a tremor that belies his age and frailty. His voice is deep, low, crackling when he speaks.

“May the sun warm your face and its light enveil your soul.”

A blessing. Words murmured in reverence for the Sun God. Zoro has heard them thousands of times in prayers, blessings, tithes.

He has never felt so bitter towards a simple blessing before, and yet the wish fills his throat with acid.

“This is all. Goodbye, Zoro.”

He says nothing, continues to not speak a word to the audience before him. These men are nothing to him now, not that he has felt any familial ties to them before. He doesn't even grace the respect of bowing his head.

He simply rises from his place and turns to leave the hall. There's a few murmurs of contempt, and surprised breaths from the attendants before a small few of them break off to follow him down the path, not having expected him to move so swiftly.

He ignores them, their scuffle of feet running to catch up and stay with him.

It's not until he's rounding the clearing of the first break in the forest of bamboo that he realizes he has stomped his way deeper into the grove of green all the way to the small dirty clearing by the pond that he and Kuina trained frequently when they were younger.

It is his last place of sanctuary and he will never see it again…

If he's honest, Kuina has been the only person in this village that he has felt a connection to. Something deeper than *stranger* that he views the rest of the townspeople with. A flame more akin to family.

Her memory goes back as far as he can remember. Having most of his meals with her once she had become old enough to order the servants to call him into attendance. The elders weren't fond of his company, but Shimotsuki saw merit in the training and rivalry they gave each other. Two young alphas able to train and keep up with each other in strength.

"Leave us."

The biting command rattles in his bones.

He turns his head to make sure he's not hearing things and watches as Kuina hurries the attendants along down the existing path. She stares at Zoro with something like anger in her eyes, but they're much too wet for him to believe that she is genuinely angry at him.

"It's not fair," she starts with, jaw working stiffly, frustration visible in the tension of her shoulders and the pinch of her eyebrows. She stares, defiant, and Zoro imagines she has said the same to the stupid group of elders and her father.

Zoro doesn't know what to say against the ball of grief that sits in his throat and the same bubble of familiar relief that warms his chest.

"This is one thing that we cannot make fair," he says.

It is one thing he will not fight to *make* fair with her. He will go to war and stand against any elder or alpha that dares to claim Kuina a lesser alpha just for being a girl. But this…

"It should be me going, not you."

"No. This is the right way." Zoro barely finishes before Kuina rushes him.

He is unarmed, swords left tucked under his mattress in his room before he was whisked away this morning to be preened and groomed.

Kuina however, does not ever go anywhere without her snow white katana on her hip. Its blade swings for his throat, but it's too blind with emotion, sloppy, that Zoro easily steps away from its reach.

When Zoro catches her wrist on her next swing, he gives a twist, enough to pressure her into dropping the white blade entirely. What he isn't expecting is for Kuina to step into him with the same breath, other arm latching around him tightly in a hug before the katana has even hit the ground.

He releases her arm, confused for the brief half second it takes him to notice that Kuina is *crying*. A quiet, angry thing that she hides against his chest.

He is struck with what to do. How to comfort her. He has only ever known scuffling and biting at the other alpha. Treating her the same way Zoro would any other opponent typically was what got her to feel better.

"*Idiot*," she hisses, a balled up fist thudding at his chest.

He stares helplessly at the top of her head. He didn't want to upset her but he didn't have a choice except to leave under the command of the chief. Even if he would go in her stead without being commanded to do so.

Oddly, Zoro feels pressure at the back of his throat, heat behind his eyes that burns into an ache. He remembers when Kuina was *bigger* than him, scoffing at Zoro's tears when she beat him in a match every single time and telling him to get up and try again. The way they would tussle and roll in the dirt until some poor servant had to find them for a meal.

He has spent years in her comfort and friendship, a sister, promising her that he would not treat her any differently being a girl, he didn't care, as long as she was a worthy opponent. How she held onto the prejudices so tightly. How he is throwing it back in her face again, without meaning to now.

"No alpha has come back alive after being sent to Nika." Kuina mumbles to him.

"What are you talking about?"

She suddenly pulls away from him, arms length, and then a steady step back as she swipes at her eyes.

"Every alpha that has been sent as an offering to the vessel of the Sun God has died within the very same week. That is why they are sending you instead of me. Because they know that you will be–"

"Wait, wait. Died? From what?"

"Zoro come *on*, you cannot be this dense. That fucking omega kills every single sacrifice, offering, or stupidly willing alpha that is placed at his feet. It is why they continue to reach out to the surrounding kingdoms for their alphas. They say that he is unstable. There's something *wrong* with *it*."

Great. So not only is he being sent as a second option, a sacrifice, he is quite literally being offered up to a God for slaughter.

He’s not heard of this though, but the gravity of how serious the elders were before give him a clue as to why they were so…

“I’ll survive. I promise. I’ll write to you.”

It’s not a proper consolation, but it’s *something*. Kuina looks at him like she doesn’t believe him. He isn’t sure he believes himself.

“Kuina. Really. I’m not going to let some delusional little omega get the advantage over me. I’ve been training with the two strongest people alive for all my life, right? You have that little faith in me?”

Another small fist nails him in the chest, he grunts as it connects.

“Stay alive, Roronoa Zoro.”

“I will.”

They fetch him as the sky is still dark. The sun hasn't even begun to start rising.

He’s comfortable in his bed, easy to fall asleep anywhere but especially in the comfort of his own room, even with the looming event of never returning again.

He is washed *again*, fussed over with the pretense of being cleansed for the journey. Enrobed in a new batch of linens and silks, dark greens that mold to his body comfortably.

They lead him out to the yard, where a group of horses and about twenty foot servants are, surrounding a wooden and gold palanquin, draped in a sultry red on all sides, darker red suns embroidered in a pattern all over the fabric.

Ready to get this over with, he starts for the open side of the carriage when one of the servants stops him with an arm stuck out in his path. He looks at him with a question at the tip of his tongue when a red sash is handed to him, the same thick, deep red that curtains the palanquin.

“You must wear this. The next time you will see the Sun is when you arrive at the palace.”

“It’s dark now.” Zoro points out. The moon is full tonight, illuminating the small clearing with the soft pale light and glitter of the stars. The heavy, multiple layers of fabric suggest to him that the palanquin will be dark on the inside as well.

“...”

“If I say no?” he tries, only to be met with more silence, blindfold still held out to him unwaveringly.

A growl sneers from his lips and he snatches up the fabric, hastily pulling it against his eyes and tying it in a loose knot behind his head. Hands undo the knot almost immediately, and another pair

of hands gently fold the blindfold neatly so that no wrinkles press into his skin, and the knot behind is secured tightly, expertly.

“If you have any needs, please let us know and we will assist you. It will be a quick seven days of travel, my Lord.” a different voice, softer, feminine, comes from his side as a hand takes him under the arm.

He lets himself be guided forward, glad that he saw the carriage beforehand so he has an idea of how low he should duck before stepping in. His knees sink immediately in the soft plush of the cushioning inside.

“May the Sun warm your face and His light enveil your soul.” the servant mutters reverently to him. He says nothing to it, mentally sending the blessing into the dirt and squashing it underfoot.

Once he is completely inside, he can hear the rustle of fabric as the curtains of the palanquin are drawn shut. He is curious if anyone would notice if he were to remove the blindfold while inside.

He reaches out to feel the corners of the carriage, finds that the thick cushion extends the entire floor. He is able to lay all the way out on his back with room to spare, but not so much that he could lift his arms over his head and stretch them out comfortably, nor could he stretch his wingspan either side of him without touching the sides.

On one wall, there is a small ledge, and as he traces his fingers over it and down the sides, he finds metal latches that slide away so that the ledge can be lifted. A makeshift table of sorts.

The north and south walls are a delicate grid of bamboo to allow airflow, while the two sides of the palanquin have a slightly elevated lip of wood, but otherwise are just the heavy fall of the fabric curtains. The ceiling is the same design, a grid of bamboo weaved into a geometric pattern and blanketed by cloth.

Aside from the tabled ledge, there are three pillows that he finds tucked in the opposite corner, and nothing else.

Fine. He’ll just enjoy the alone time for catching up on his sleep again. Zoro flops back onto the cushions with a heavy drop that makes the wood under his back creak with his weight thrown into it. Not soon after the entire structure wobbles.

He’s worried he’s already broken the damn thing before the trip even started, but then the feeling of weightlessness sends butterflies in his stomach, and he realizes the palanquin has been lifted and carried.

They begin moving and the ride is surprisingly smooth. Zoro finds it easy to cross his arms behind his head, pillows around him to help keep him propped as he slips back to sleep.

When Zoro wakes up, he tries to open his eyes, forgetting about the blindfold until he is met with darkness. He has no idea how long he was sleeping or if it is morning, noon, or evening.

The steps and hoof-fall outside is soft, muffled by the heavy drapes around him. He didn't remember seeing any horses when they had left, and the palanquin wasn't equipped to be horse-drawn. He can feel the gentle rocking from the multiple footfalls of the people carrying him.

"Got anything to drink?" He tries.

There is no answer or break in the footsteps outside. He waits to open his mouth again until there is a sliver of warmth that streaks over his arm and hand and knee. The curtain pulled back must allow the sunlight on him.

There is a tap of a canteen at the back of his hand and he takes it without thanks. A sniff of the open rim makes him wrinkle his nose.

"You don't have any *booze*?"

"There is only water." Short, curt, clipped. And the warmth across his side retreats as he assumes the curtain drops closed again.

Zoro sneers as he gulps at the water in the given canteen. There's no way they packed enough water for the number of them all for a seven days trip. There *has* to be alcohol stashed somewhere. If there isn't he might not make it all the way to the New World.

As it turns out, they *do* have alcohol. Wine. And only one cask of it.

It's on the third day that Zoro growls at the servant that brings him a canteen of water and food to find him something to *drink*. They try to prattle on about keeping his body *pure* for the Sun God, and it takes him threatening to take the blindfold off and go off to find the nearest village to get some alcohol for them to cough up their stash.

One of the servants tells him through grit teeth that it was meant to be an offering for the temple, and he just laughs, tucking the small wooden barrel against his hip. It's only as big as his torso, but it'll be enough to give him a nice buzz.

"Am I not enough of an offering?"

…no answer. Guess not.

By the seventh day he knows that he is going to go bored out of his mind. There is only so much exercise he can do inside of the palanquin and even that is limited. They only let him out to let him use the bathroom and stretch his legs at night. The inside of the box is only just enough for Zoro to kneel inside of in a crouch or to lay out flat on his back.

His arms itch to go through a series of *kata* to maintain his swordsmanship and his form. To be able to take heavy stones and focus on working his muscles. He doesn't know what he'll do if he learns that this is how his life will be from now on. Maybe he'll risk the execution and wrath of the Sun to run away.

The morning of the seventh day, when they tell him they will arrive at the temple by midday, they strip Zoro down and bathe him with the rest of their water supply, ensuring he is free of sweat and is once more rubbed down to glistening in perfumed oils and clean robes.

These feel heavier at his shoulders and waist. He guesses they are ceremonial, more intricate than the comfortable ones he's been in so far. They spend time polishing the jewelry on his wrists and neck and ankles and waist. One attendant tries to touch the set of earrings in his left ear and he snaps his teeth at them and they don't even try to fight him for it.

They have to be sick of him by this point, he can't blame them. He wasn't exactly making it an easy job for them. He didn't want it to be easy.

The day is warm, sweltering inside of the palanquin, but short lived. It's not a miserably long day today.

The rattle of the platform touching the ground makes Zoro sit up.

"We are here." A hand takes him by the elbow and guides him out of the soft cushion of his prison. The ground under foot is more firm than the soft sands they had been traversing.

In the distance, he can hear the rush of a village? There's the rattle of wheels on uneven ground, horses, voices. He reaches up to finally take the fucking blindfold off and is quickly stopped by another firm hand.

"Not yet," the servant immediately to his left hisses.

Zoro is quickly losing his patience now. He must grit his teeth now to keep from making any biting comments.

They guide him forward on foot now, towards the sounds of the commotion and busy life of a village or town. He steps with confidence, eager to get to their destination so he can see again. The darkness these past days have been cruel and cold, even now as he stands under the beat of the midday sun.

He must be led down a main street. He can hear the voices on either side of him now, various volumes of hushed, whispering, talking, all making a commotion about him.

"That's the new alpha?" "This is Nika's offering." "Finally an appeasement, I hope good fortune begins to shine on us again." "He's bigger than–" "What an alpha–" "Is that..?" "--from the Shimotsuki Village–"

All loud, too many voices over top one another for him to actually catch anything important. They all sound interested, intrigued, wary, excited.

When they come to a sudden stop, he stumbles.

"Woah there," a different voice he's not used to comes from ahead. He's become used to all of the voices of the attendants that have been with him for the past seven days. This person is new.

"Hello there, Alpha." the male voice says nicely. Zoro listens, a slight tip of his head. Is this his omega? The Sun God?

He can't catch a scent quite yet, too many people around him to pick just one. If he focuses, breathes deep from his chest, he can tell the person in front of him is an alpha as well.

"My name is Sabo. I will accompany you for the rest of the way, if that is okay? We are very selective of who is allowed to enter the temple today."

Hm. Sure. He gives a small shrug to release the hands of the attendants that flank him. They go away from him easily enough, replaced by a single warm, solid hand that presses at the center of his back.

"Very good. There are some steps immediately in front of you. They continue for quite a ways, and are all the same height. If you would?" Sabo gives him a gentle pressure of his fingers, urging him forward again.

Zoro carefully lifts a foot, slow when he sets it down on the step that is in front of him. He steps up, then finds the next, and as Sabo's hand remains on his back, Zoro gains confidence in his footing, repetitive as they begin their ascent.

"So. When do I get to take this damn thing off my eyes?"

It earns him a light chuckle from Sabo before he responds, "The priests are sticklers for tradition, I'm afraid. It won't be very long once we are inside. He is waiting for you. It will come off as soon as I can do so without getting either of us in trouble."

"Sounds like you guys also have to deal with some overbearing shit leaders, huh? Guess I'll feel right at home."

Sabo hums carefully, like he's listening, but has nothing to offer in a reply. Maybe he doesn't appreciate Zoro digging at their kingdom's elders before he's even stepped foot into their palace. Or maybe he's not allowed to talk bad about them.

The climb feels like forever, now that there's no light conversation. He didn't think there would be so many steps, but it's been at least two minutes now. How high up does this thing go?

He has a steady pace now, comfortable knowing that the stairs don't change under his feet. It's quieter up here as well, away from the voices of the people in the streets. As they go higher, it even smells different. He can catch the subtle waft of incense burning, smoke and rich spice.

"You have three more steps until the top," Sabo pipes up kindly after another five minutes of steps. Zoro counts it in his head, and finds his fourth step falls on the same level. *Finally*.

"Not too winded, I hope?"

"I'm fine. Now can I–"

"You will have to leave it. I'll guide you inside as well. There is a pad in the middle of the room for you to present yourself on. You will need to do this first before the procession can begin. You do not have to move after that. I'm sorry everything must be so quick, we do not have much time before He gets bored."

Sabo's hand again is a steady, solid pressure at his back, and Zoro can't fight against his feet going forward, lest he fall onto his face.

Annoyed, he continues on. Deep breaths. It will be over soon, he tells himself. He just has to do a little show for whatever old priests are demanding it, offer himself up to this omega Lord, and then hopefully get to go to his rooms to drink himself into a nap to ease his growing headache.

Zoro can tell they have entered a large room, from the change in sound of their footsteps. There is a distinct echo, it must be a large room. It is warmer here, despite the shade.

Subtly, there is a pinch of the fabric between his shoulders, Sabo stopping him. Zoro can feel the soft bump of a cushion in front of his feet.

This must be it.

He doesn't wait for any more guidance. He takes the fabric over his thighs, gently hiking it as he lowers himself onto his knees, back straight, head bowed.

Sabo's fingers pull at the knot behind his head and the blindfold comes free and off his face with a soft slip.

The first thing he sees is the sandy beige of the floor under him, a smattering of small mosaic tiles in neutral stone colors in circular patterns of varying sizes. The cushion he is kneeling upon is a sun-faded pink-red.

It is so *bright*. Though he imagines that is mostly due to being blinded for seven days.

He squints without helping it. His eyes hurt, headache growing sharper as he tries to focus. There appears to be a large number of windows in here, letting in a ridiculous amount of sunlight, but Zoro can't even raise his eyes to give the room a once over.

Go through the motions, he growls at himself in his mind. Get this over with already.

The robes in his hands are released, letting the fabric drape on himself loosely where he is knelt. He can finally see the intricate design of the robes.

A deep hunter green as the outer robe, there appears to be three more layers under it in various lightening shades of green. The obi around his waist is thinner than traditional, but it is ornate with swirling emerald and gold beads and sequins. The pattern is meaningless to him, as is the soft nature of florals and leaves he can barely make out on the dark green robes.

The *cut* of the whole ensemble is…surprising.

The V-cut goes almost all the way down to his navel. His chest peeking from the fitted hem of the collar that lays against his collarbones and his pecs. He's not sure how he didn't notice or even feel how revealing it was until now that he is seeing it.

Calling the entire outfit stunning would be an understatement.

"Roronoa Zoro." A low, mature voice calls him from above. He knows better than to look up right now. It is not yet time.

"Welcome to the Temple of Nika and the country of Raftel. May the Sun warm your face and its light enveil your soul." There is power held in the voice, something heavy, like a hand that reaches down to him.

He feels the command without anything being told to him.

Remaining on his knees, he lowers himself back to rest on his heels, hands resting just above his knees in a relaxed posture. He turns his palms up, wrists vulnerable as he bares them and the scent glands there, holds his hands open and welcoming.

Finally, he allows himself to straighten his shoulders and bring his chin up.

The gold on his throat and chest clinks gently with the motion, earrings swaying as a reminder on his left ear.

The room is *huge*.

The ceilings must reach up to 20 meters at least. There are solid, marble pillars that flank the walls from one end to the other. The top meter or two of the marble walls are lined with openings, windows that allow the flood of sunlight into the space. The marble roof itself is solid, apart from one ornate, round opening of a skylight.

The beams of light that shine in through it come down directly on the throne at the top of a dais that is a few feet in front of Zoro. It is so tall that he must lift his chin, must raise his throbbing eyes up to see the man that sits on the ornate, golden throne that is directly in the beam of the sun.

The throne is massive, gold spires that extend from the cushioned throne in a complete circle, a vivid contrast of the sun itself. There is a young man that stands just off to the right of the throne, chin-length wavy hair, dark. Honey warm skin and sun-kissed freckles that cover him entirely, mostly gathered at his shoulders and face. Torso bare and a low sling of linen pants, adorned in carnelian beads at his throat and gold bangles on his arms.

The…boy, that sits in the throne sideways looks like he's moments away from falling asleep. His grey eyes look down on Zoro with a lazy sort of interest, his legs crossed gently at the ankles, slung over one armrest of the throne as his shoulders hunch in against the other armrest.

His black hair has almost a glow to it with the way the sunlight hits him from above, giving him a sort of halo around the messy spikes. His face is soft, round, and, the longer Zoro stares at him, the more there is interest that colors his face.

He is shrouded in a light tunic, short at his knees, sleeves tied up at his shoulders with gold bands, a matching gold rope that cinches at his waist. Worn sandals. He looks thin, but lean, well toned and filled at his shoulders and biceps and thighs. His skin gleams with the light, sunlight glittering off him as he adjusts himself in the throne to sit properly.

He's *glowing*.

And properly interested. In Zoro.

Zoro finds himself swallowing, holding onto his defiance, his pride. He keeps his chin up steady, staring up at the young man's eyes, not backing down even as he notices him preparing to stand.

Oh? Has he angered him, perhaps? Properly vexed the omega into action? Maybe he will immediately be sick of Zoro's attitude and blatant disrespect by holding his gaze for too long and send him back.

Stay alive, Kuina had said.

Zoro doesn't want to… to look away and submit himself. But he makes a quick note of how many people are also along the walls of the room now, guards with spears double their height and with wicked, sharp obsidian black points, all eyes on him.

His pride sits heavy and burning hot in his stomach as he finally lowers his head in a bow, breaking the contact first. He keeps his body open, arms still and palms up as he finally lets his head turn to the side. He finds a point on the ground to stare at before he tips his jaw, offering the side of his neck.

Properly placed, an alpha presenting himself to his omega. The very picture of supplication. He has never practiced such a motion before, but here it comes naturally, as he lets his instincts guide him.

He loosens the hold of his pheromones. Allows himself to be as vulnerable as he can make himself in hopes of appeasing the elders and priests among the room, and of course the young man on the throne.

There is suddenly commotion, hushed murmurs from the corners of the room, and a hissed "*Oi Luf–"* and the solid thud of feet on the ground.

Zoro doesn't lift his eyes. Even as those steps come closer to him, closing in until they are just in front of him.

He can sense the omega standing there. Not to mention the vague form of him in his periphery. His presence is *heavy*. Zoro doesn't move, waits for what feels like forever until finally there is a hand under his chin, guiding his face up.

The young man is much prettier up close. Zoro allows his eyes to roam, the soft curve of his nose, dark eyelashes, soft pink lips, the faintest crease in his golden skin near his eyes and the corners of his mouth.

There is a scar under his left eye, jagged, and the only thing that marks him as flawed.

"Welcome to Raftel, Zoro," he says lightly.

There are a few things that catches Zoro's attention. Firstly, that his omega is not the one who originally welcomed him when he first came in. The omega's voice is mirthful, light, full of youth and warmth.

Secondly, is that the omega's touch is getting warmer, until warmth turns into heat, enough to bring a sweat to his temples, goosebumps rising under the heavy band of the gold collar. His alpha rumbles under his skin, an echo of an ache between his legs.

The grey eyes that bore into him from above do not allow Zoro to squirm in discomfort, they do not allow him to look away. They are enthralling. This omega himself is enticing, like how he knows it is bad to look directly into the sun, but one cannot help themselves when curiosity burns, and burns, and *burns*.

There is a scalding brand of want that flares under his skin all at once, like a sweat breaking out, his alpha responding with its own eager, approving warmth.

The omega suddenly smiles at him, and Zoro sees it.

He *sees* the Sun. Looks into its brightness and lets it engulf him in flames.

“May the Sun warm your face and My light enveil your soul.”

Chapter End Notes

OMG!!! WE DID IT! LUFFY!! waow!!

what will happen to zoro next?!?!

Chapter 2: II

Chapter Summary

> An awkward dinner, some answers to questions giving rise to more questions, and a vision. Someone get Zoro a drink, he definitely will need it.

Chapter Notes

> To everyone leaving a comment from chapter one, I LOVE YOU SO MUCH, your anticipation and excitement brings me so much happiness and motivation to keep pounding out the chapters. I've never written so many words every day, consistently, in a looong time, so I just want to say thank you and ILY and now let me stop talking so you guys can get to the fic!
>
> (づ ᴗ _ᴗ)づ♡♡♡♡♡♡♡

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There is something to be said about Icarus.

To fly higher and higher, closer to the warmth and bright rays of the sun. The welcoming freedom that its light brings.

Like a fuse that becomes lit by a simple spark, catching fast, burning too quick to catch again and put out. Flames that grow and burn.

There is life there, freedom, a gentleness and viciousness that ripples in harmony back and forth like solar flares.

Enticing.

Hot.

There is a yearning heat that blooms in Zoro’s core, deep in him that flickers to life the moment sharp omega fangs pierce his nape and mark him to the bone.

The world falls away.

The headrush is like a whip-snap. Too fast, too sharp, too much that throbs into a growing ache the longer time moves away from it.

He knows he makes some sort of noise, but he doesn’t know what. Probably something pathetic, if the way his limbs go limp is any indication.

There are people in the room, quickly leaving in a hush, leaving him alone to burn in peace. Allowing the ember to flicker into a flame, the wax at his back dripping away and feathers falling apart, burning and consuming until there is nothing but ash.

It hurts.

No one is willing to watch a man burn alive. And Zoro *burns*.

The room is cold, that is the first thing that he notices when he is conscious enough for it. The second that he is aware of is that he's *not* actually dead. Or maybe he is and hell is cold.

"Zoro?"

That's–

The omega from before is the first thing he sees when he opens his eyes. He's leaning halfway over him, propped on a hand that is stretched across him.

His eyes are bright and wide, creased softly at the corners when he smiles over him.

"Awake finally? You snore, hehe." A soft finger pokes him on the cheek.

Without gracing him with an answer, Zoro looks around where they are, no longer in the throne room.

This room is much smaller, but just as bright. There are windows all along one entire wall, the likes of which Zoro has never seen, letting in as much sunlight as possible. There is the bright blue sky beyond them, dotted with soft, fluffy white clouds... They must still be high up.

White marble lines the entire room from the ceiling to the walls to the floors. There is a line of dark wooden drawers along another wall furthest from them, a solid wooden door to its right. A grand rug takes up the floor with an intricate swirling pattern.

They are in a bed, the mattress under his back is plush in a way that it must be stuffed with down and wool, luxury that he has never been afforded. The sheets are a pristine white that matches the marble, and they feel softer than anything Zoro has touched.

And–

Oh.

The omega is *naked*.

Zoro of course had noticed the obvious lack of clothing over his torso, but it's when the omega leans up over him more, adjusts his seat in the bed, that Zoro catches the provocative slip of the silken sheets on the omega's hips that suggest there is nothing on under them.

The contrast is made more obvious, alluring, with the honey gold of the omega's smooth skin and the white sheets. Zoro can't seem to look away, even when the omega rises up to his knees and Zoro can see the young man in his full glory.

The fingers under his chin, gently tipping his head up, break his gaze away from the soft cock between the omega's legs and the tantalizing span of his spread thighs.

"Ace says that it's rude to stare. What is Zoro looking for, hm?"

Eyes up, Zoro catches the angle of the omega's shoulders. He's lean, but there's an obvious tone of muscle under his skin, the way he carries himself like he's bigger than he actually is. A casual confidence. Soft chest, tan nipples, flat stomach, soft but toned legs spread either side of Zoro's lap…

Zoro frowns, "who the hell is Ace?"

The only door in the room swings open fast, hard enough to bounce off the marble wall behind it with a *BANG* that makes Zoro flinch.

"LUFFY YOU–"

Oh, it's the freckled man from before, the one up on the dais next to the throne. He's red in the face, hair wild and clothes a bit rumpled. He takes a long second to stare at the two of them in the bed.

Zoro is now acutely aware that he is *also* very much naked, aside from the golden collar locked around his neck. That and there's the omega straddling him, the thin sheet of silk separating them from being skin to skin. Zoro wills himself to not get hard...

"*Urgh* I heard you the first thousand times!" The omega over him pouts, and then suddenly drops down to lay on Zoro, arms folded over Zoro's chest, "I'm just making sure Zoro was okay first."

He doesn't want to point out that he doesn't know who *either* of these two men are.

"Roronoa Zoro," the man at the door calls for him and Zoro looks away from the omega nuzzling against his chest and batting his long, pretty lashes at him.

"I'm Ace. I am very sorry this seems to be our first genuine meeting," he approaches the side of the bed and reaches out to grab the omega by the arm and give him a yank, "this here is Luffy. And now the permanent thorn in your side."

Once Luffy is out of bed, Ace is taking the draped cloth off his arm and practically stuffing the omega into it, clothing him easily despite his squirming and protests like he's had substantial practice doing this.

The short tunic was similar to the one Luffy had on before in the throne room, though this was a soft cream white, fastened with gold around his waist and shoulders, a halter around the neck that leaves Luffy's back and shoulder blades tantalizingly bare. Ace fusses over the hopeless number of cowlicks in Luffy's dark hair.

“A meal will be ready in about an hour. Get yourself together Luffy. Go. I’ll take care of your Alpha.”

“Aw, Ace. Please can I–”

“Leave.” Ace hisses, and gives Luffy’s ear a small tug, which has the omega whining, but stomping his way out of the room, rubbing at his ear all the way out. He whirls around in the doorway, looks at Zoro briefly.

“Don't be mean to him, Ace! I’ll see you at the table, Zoro! We can talk more then!” And then the door is being shut behind him, leaving a rather empty silence in his wake. Zoro can feel a headache coming on.

Seemingly sharing his sentiment, Ace sighs, pinching at the bridge of his nose before he makes his way to the drawers on the other side of the room, opening them and beginning to rummage.

He returns with a thick fold of white cloth, held out to him politely.

“I’m sorry, again, for meeting like this. I believe you also met Sabo yesterday. We are both, uh… I suppose retainers for Luffy. We grew up together since we were all very little. Sabo does more in the diplomatic side of things, though. The priests call us prophets, don’t pay any mind to that, it’s all shit.”

Zoro listens intently as he dresses himself, ears feeling warm, his nudity doesn’t seem to phase Ace in the slightest. He still isn’t sure what the hell is going on, too many questions and none of them being answered. He has a feeling though, that he shouldn’t ask anything right away.

“I won’t go into it here, since the council will probably give you a nice show at dinner. All you need to know is to sit at Luffy’s right and don’t begin eating until Luffy does, but that isn’t very hard to do. You’re free to speak as you’d like at the table unless Luffy says otherwise, you’re his Alpha, so you have more say than the council. Ah– that’s right. In front of the council, you must address him as Nika.”

Ace fetches a pair of sandals from one of the bottom drawers, eyeing them and Zoro’s feet for a pensive moment, before bringing them over. They obviously haven’t been worn before. Zoro stares at the drawers and wonders, just how many spare tunics and shoes are there. How many alphas have been in this exact bed…

“Luffy hates it, but the stupid priests are rather insistent on that one thing. Remember that and you’ll be just fine.”

Ace has a small smile on his face as he talks about Luffy, Zoro notices the fondness that comes off the other alpha. He’d guessed they were brothers at first glance, they look quite similar and seem to get along in a similar fashion.

There’s just one thing.

“He doesn’t look like a killer.”

Ace’s fingers stop where they’re picking invisible lint off Zoro’s shoulders and straightening the pleats of his clothes. The light mood turns sour immediately and Ace’s eyes turn dark as he glares at him, serious.

“That’s right. Luffy is *no* killer.”

The other alpha steps away from him. Gently placing his hands in front of himself the way an attendant in waiting would. Suddenly he smiles, but it is not kind.

“But *I* am willing to be. I will make myself clear only once. If you raise a single hand against Luffy in any way, it will be the last time you ever raise that hand again. If you can keep this in mind, we should have no problems.”

Ace suddenly graces him with a bow, subtle at the waist but a full drop of his head, and Zoro is startled with embarrassment at the submissive gesture and simultaneous anger at being threatened.

“Now. If you would?” Ace’s arm extends, gesturing to the door, “if you’re late to the table Luffy will eat all of the food and you’ll go to bed hungry.”

The table, as it is, is a long single cut plane of a tree; free, raw edges jagged all the way down both sides. It’s on a short base, and everyone is seated around it on the floor on plush cushions.

This room is similar in the theme of windows. Light stone that reaches to the high ceilings, though this room is not nearly as tall and grand. The columns are a similar stone with reliefs of winged people that circle the curve of each column playfully. At the tops are all similar reliefs of a young boy, cherub-like and smiling wide, there is gold that outlines every figure of him, like a heavenly glow. The sun that catches the sides of the reliefs near the large windows make them look like the angels will step out of the stone and marble with just a mere breath.

Zoro is starting to understand what the appeal is, so much sunlight easily brightens the room with help from pristine planes of marble and light tan stone on every surface, glints off the gold that accents most of the carvings and reliefs. It’s beautiful, feels like a dream, or maybe he’s in heaven.

The light filtering through is a golden, almost orange hue. Evening, almost dusk. The corners of the room hold dark shadows that Zoro sees blanketed with quiet and waiting servants and guards.

From a quick glance, there must be at least thirty people seated at the table. All of them men, old in age, graying or bald, and wiry thin, even under the drapery of their robes.

The majority of them are veiled. Gold hooks that loop both ears with a gauzy piece of white that curtains the gold bar connecting the earpieces. The veils reach to their chests, flowing softly with movement or the turn of their heads.

Zoro feels out of place and definitely underdressed, too much skin…

This room is full of strange people in a foreign kingdom thousands of miles away from his comfort. This place is so *dry*. Arid and hot and suffocating. Too many eyes now turned to him, burning hot.

He almost steps back, retreats from the room so he can go curl up in the bed he had found himself in earlier and sleep until this all goes away.

“Zoro!! Over here!” Luffy calls for him from the farthest end of the table.

The smile that's on his face is bright. Zoro had seen him smile before, back in the room when he woke up, but nothing this big yet. He looks silly and not at all like he was in the attendance of what seemed to be all of the highest officials of his kingdom sitting around him.

All eyes on him, Zoro steps forward, feeling awkward but keeping his chin up, making his way to Luffy's side.

There's a spread of plates all along the table, filled with various types and cuts of meats, vegetables, nuts, fruit and bread. Luffy has already amassed a stack of empty plates and three immediate ones in front of him piled high with what Zoro sees as roast, poultry of some sort, and two racks of ribs.

To Luffy's right side, there is an empty cushion, which Zoro lowers himself onto only after Luffy bounces his seat cushion over a few inches and leans over to pat at the empty one animatedly. Sabo, the blonde from earlier, sits on Luffy's immediate left, smiling at him quietly in greeting. Ace, who followed Zoro into the room, circles around to the only empty place left, next to Sabo.

No one has greeted him other than Luffy. Should he say something? Ace earlier told him he was free to speak as he wanted, but it's awkwardly quiet in here, aside from the chewing, clatter of utensils, rustling of cloth.

Are they waiting for him to say something? To do something? Many of the veiled men are still looking at him, some have stopped eating altogether.

"Why so stiff? Here," Sabo pushes one of the plates across the table to Zoro, it's packed on with shredded meat, roasted vegetables, a big chunk of bread. He takes a bite from the bread to busy his mouth.

One of the veiled men to Zoro's side sighs, annoyance very clear in his tone without a single word.

"Go on and ask your questions already. This is painful. We have never had such a quiet alpha," he grumbles.

Zoro turns to look at him and before he can open his mouth, one of the older men on the further corner of the table speaks over him.

"Are we just going to ignore the fact that this alpha is not even born of the village that sent him? What happened to honor?"

This opens the table for the rest of the men seated to pipe in as well, before Zoro can even get a word in.

"What does it matter who sent him? If we are unable to satisfy Nika's cycles we will have bigger problems."

"Do you not care to preserve the purity of The Solaris? What if they were to produce?" one of them hisses.

"The purity of *what*? Every alpha that has been offered has proven to not be worthy. This much has been shown by their inability to take care of Nika during his mortal cycles. Every one of them is *useless*."

“What does purity matter in this conversation? We are at our end. There are no other kingdoms willing to even consider sending us offerings. If this alpha fails as well, then what will we do? Nika cannot go through a cycle alone, we would all suffer for it. If he were to ravage the city–”

“Who cares? They do not need to come willingly. All this procession is delaying the inevitable. Allow Nika to choose an alpha during the Perihelion and he will surely find a worthy offering, and we may have at least a year of peace.”

Finally, Luffy stops his chewing and a clean bone from the ribs clattering to the table as he growls. The voices hush immediately.

“*Enough*. I don’t wanna talk about any more of this. It’s always the same thing every time. Leave it or–”

Sabo quickly interrupts, and Zoro spots the way his hand rests on Luffy’s knee from under the table and squeezes, “As Nika pointed out, this is a topic that we all tend to go in circles over every season. We will hold any further discussion of future offerings at the next Congregation. Anyone who has an issue with this may leave.”

Silence.

Luffy huffs and goes back into his plate with a renewed vigor, cheeks bulging on every chew as he overfills his mouth. Ace and Sabo wordlessly and seamlessly continue to slide plates towards him as they become empty.

“Yeah. I have a question, actually. About all of this,” Zoro catches their eyes again, and he notices even Luffy slows down, eyes filled with interest, “Am I just a heat partner then?”

The priest next to him speaks up first.

“There have been…problems, with retaining a mate for Nika for the past few years. His divinity becomes too strong during his heats and he loses control of himself.”

“There has only been once that Nika has gone through a heat alone. His first, when he presented. Nika rampaged through the west side of the city and just about leveled the entire sector. Thousands of lives were lost.”

Zoro glances at Luffy, who has grown pale and quiet. He keeps his head down, eyes turned away from where Zoro is looking. The eldest of the men at the table continue to talk.

“Nika was only twelve at the time. He had not yet been brought into the temple. After that, however, we had no choice. The heat after that we had given him an alpha to assist with his cycle. This kept the palace safe and only the room he had been in was destroyed. But the alpha had also perished.”

“We have provided Nika with an alpha for every cycle and none have been able to keep up. Being the alpha for the Sun God is not a light responsibility.”

Zoro scowls, processing the whole thing. Something seems off about it. Snatching up a young, freshly presented omega and locking him away in a palace with alphas pushed onto him every heat just seems… wrong. Didn’t these old men respect and worship Luffy? *Nika*?

One of the elders from the far end of the table pipes in, “As well, let this be a warning to you now, Alpha. If you attempt to leave your life will be forfeit and we will hunt you down. We have done so before, we will not hesitate to do so again. This is your responsibility now, whether you like it or not.”

There is a sudden clap of hands, once, loud enough to echo in the room, Zoro startles, looking at Ace who is leaning back on his hands now.

“Oookay, enough with all the threatening and heavy talk,” he looks at Zoro, leveling him with a stare, “any other questions for the council?”

Keep it light, basic, he thinks to himself. Deciding he’d like to at least just know the basic terms and titles these dusty priests keep throwing around.

“What is The Solaris?”

Ace smiles, gestures towards Luffy with a thumb, “Gods go by many titles. These old geezers like to be fancy– *oof!* ”

Sabo’s elbow jabs into Ace’s ribs from the side and he hisses under his breath about being respectful. Even under the cloth veils, Zoro can see the glaring eyes of the priests around them.

“Okay then, what about a mortal cycle?”

“The state he is in now,” Sabo gives a soft gesture of his hand towards Luffy as if to demonstrate, “When Nika’s divinity is not in full power.”

“So like I said before, I’m here to just be a sacrifice for his heats, then?” Bitter, Zoro stuffs a whole rib into his mouth, sucking the meat off it and chewing.

Sabo offers him a solemn smile, “In a rather crude, simplified way. Yes. I hope that you can see yourself as more than that.”

“If I survive…”

A silence fills the room again.

Zoro isn’t trying to be cruel. He sees the way Luffy’s shoulders stiffen. He hasn’t taken a single bite since Zoro began asking things. Ace must have been a liar, if Luffy is acting so guilty at the mere hint of the dead alphas that came before him. That it would likely be his fate too.

“What then? If I *can* help him through his heat, what comes after?”

“There is nothing to be done next,” the elder to his right speaks up, “if you are the one to satisfy Nika, you will remain with him and become his Luna.”

Would he never get his freedom back? Shackled here forever? He considers it, never again being in the quiet green of the bamboo forest with the crisp mountain air. Never seeing Kuina again. His chest aches.

“I’m not hungry anymore,” Luffy mutters.

Zoro only hears him because he's right next to him. He watches silently as the omega stands and quickly heads for an entrance on the back end of the room. Different from where Zoro entered.

He watches with the rest of the table until Luffy completely disappears behind a curtained entryway, the beads swinging erratically after Luffy passed through them in his hurry.

Zoro does not see the glance that Sabo and Ace give each other.

"Well, and with that, I must beg the council's pardon. We will be leaving as well." Sabo addresses the room. He gives Zoro a pointed look and a nod of his chin before turning.

Zoro is on his feet by the time he notices Ace rounding the corner that Luffy disappeared behind. Sabo leads him in the same direction and Zoro doesn't bother to even give the dinner table or whispering voices a backwards glance.

Sabo takes him down an empty hallway. There's a series of turns and stairs they go through before Sabo slows himself down enough to walk in step with Zoro.

"Quite a busy second day, huh?"

"Second day?"

"Oh. Did– No, I guess not. You've been asleep since yesterday after Luffy claimed you in the throne room."

That… explains a lot. No wonder he had been so hungry. He still feels like he could do with a meal. He had only picked at his plate during dinner. It felt odd, listening to the council that he assumed worshiped the ground Luffy walked on be so strict, talking about him like he wasn't even there.

"Being tied to Nika tends to be a lot to handle all at once. Ace and myself are here to help you. I don't want you to feel as if you're doing this alone."

"Awfully nice all for a guy you just met."

Sabo smiles, scratching at his nose.

"I just want Luffy to be happy. These past three years especially haven't been easy for him. I don't know, you just seem different."

"Different how? Am I not like every alpha that's come through here?"

Against their will. Confused. Lost?

Sabo shakes his head.

"You just are. If you knew the alphas Luffy had to put up with before, you would agree. You're much more different. It's a compliment."

"Uh-huh… thanks, I think?"

Sabo clasps his hands behind himself idly as they continue to walk. He seems to be in a good mood, though Zoro can't pinpoint why.

They have come out of the long span of hallways now and Zoro blinks as the outside opens up to a shaded, covered walkway, flanked on both sides with green.

It seems to be a garden of sorts, expanding out on either side of the long breezeway. Just from here Zoro can see the abundance of fruit trees, flowering bushes, well-maintained flora in smaller planter boxes that dot the walkways in a scatter.

It seems to be a central location of the palace, one entrance on either end with the two sides opening up to what Zoro assumes is a steep drop down. He'd have to go look over the edge later, curious.

Were they not going to find Luffy? Damage control? Maybe an apology?

"This place is like a sanctuary for Luffy, the priests are not allowed in the gardens. You seem to have more questions. I can answer without holding back here. There are certain topics that are not easily touched on while in front of the council."

Zoro figured as much, considering how vague some of the answers he had received before were.

"Seems a little extreme to me," he says, following Sabo deeper into the gardens.

"I agree. The council does not see Luffy separate from Nika."

"I thought Nika was a title?"

"No. Nika is definitely… He is very real. Luffy is His vessel." Sabo takes a deep breath, like the thought alone is heavy for him to think, much less speak on. And yet, he continues.

"Luffy was quite young when he became cursed. Ah, but please don't ever let the Holy Council hear you repeat this. They believed it to be a blessing. It doesn't change that Nika took over my little brother's body, temptation or not."

"Nika is the Sun God, as you have been made aware of. I have no idea what he wants, or why he's here, or what he wants to do. Luffy shares his body with Him now."

"Nika takes over Luffy's body at least four times a year. It is worst during the summer solstice. The elders before mentioned the Perihelion; When the sun is the closest to us in the sky. This is when Nika's divinity is the strongest and his influence on Luffy is stronger too."

"Unfortunately, no matter what sun cycle we are on, Luffy's heats are… intense. He is unable to keep control of Nika. And Nika is wild and unrestrained. I'm sure you can put together the pieces?"

Skeptical, Zoro remains silent. It seems too far-fetched to be true. A god taking the body of a mortal just for, what, to cause chaos? It is not very fitting of a god, much less The Sun. Then again, Zoro did not grow up worshiping these idols. The Shimotsuki village practiced Buddhism. Zoro grew up hearing of the gods as fairy tales.

"The priests here have been worshiping Nika for as long as I can remember. There are whispers that Nika himself built this city and temple thousands of years ago. The point is, they are not willing to leave Luffy alone and with Nika's rampages, many people's lives here are threatened.

The council believes that if they find the Luna of Nika, that it will somehow fix all their problems and calm him."

"There is no truth to any of it. It is all speculation, of course. Assumptions that The Sun needs his Moon to be sated and…" Sabo suddenly sighs, a heaving breath, "I have no idea what any of them want, truly. They are all excited to have Nika here in the mortal plane and want to lavish him with worship and tributes for their own glory or reward."

"Just. I hope you keep in mind that Luffy is not your enemy... Please. Treat him with kindness. We are all trapped here because of the council. The priests wouldn't dare to harm Luffy directly, but he has a big heart and the priests know this. Locking him away and threatening the people Luffy cares about are all too easy for them. All he wants is to be free of all this."

He's not sure if anything he says would ease the other alpha's worries. This is all so new for Zoro and yet it seems that these three have done this time and time again. Zoro sighs, looking over the bright pink and purple flowers they pass, floral and a bit spicy.

"Sure. I'll try to remember…"

"Usually, you would sleep with Luffy in his room." Sabo tells him as he opens a heavy wooden door at the end of a long, quiet hallway.

It's a plain bedroom. A humble bedframe tucked against the far wall, headboard just under the only set of windows in the room. The curtains are pulled open, the dark night sky just beyond it with stars glittering in the pitch, the moon sits as a crescent among it all, casting a little bit of light.

There are candles lit on the nightstand next to the bed, as well as on the dresser on the wall by the door.

"Ace said that Luffy isn't feeling well, if it's okay that you take tonight alone…?"

"It's fine," he answers, not willing to share that he still would prefer to be alone. After everything, and even knowing he's mated to Luffy, he's practically a stranger, and Zoro feels awkward and out of place.

Zoro steps in, taking a look around the room even though there isn't much to give it a personality, even the rug under his feet is just a solid beige.

Sabo stays at the door, watching him explore for a moment before asking, "is there anything that you need for the night? There are extra blankets in the bottom drawer of the dresser if you want."

"Everything that I'd ask you for is seven days away in a village you've never stepped foot in. But thank you. This is enough."

Sabo smiles sadly at him, and Zoro hates that he knows that he's looking at him with pity.

"Don't say sorry," Zoro grumbles, beginning to take off the gold bangles from his arms, sandals set next to the dresser where he supposes will now hold all of his belongings. The very little he has.

Maybe things he will come to get.

“Alright. A good night, then?”

“Sure. Night.”

“Please, don’t hesitate to call out if you need anything. There are servants positioned at the end of this hallway. Luffy, Ace, and my rooms are across the way in the other hall.”

Zoro hums to affirm that he heard him, continuing to get himself ready to go lay down in bed and pray that sleep finds him. A deep one. Dreamless.

The door shuts after a couple of seconds of silence and Zoro sighs softly to himself.

He leaves everything at the dresser, climbs into bed with nothing but his gold collar and stares out the window until his eyes itch.

He can’t stop thinking about Luffy. Of him running off in the middle of the meal. The way his face went pale.

Why should he feel sorry? He barely knows the guy. And he didn’t say anything horrible. Not directly…

The guilt eats at him, mulling it over in his head until he growls and rolls onto his side, yanking the pillow over his head in frustration.

The omega’s just pretty, he tells himself. He’s got a pretty face and a cute smile, and it’s just stupid instincts wanting to get closer. It’s just *pity*. He’s stuck with him for the next foreseeable future, or at least until Luffy’s heat comes and Zoro gets mutilated to death.

Sighing, Zoro rolls onto his back again, stares at the dark ceiling. There’s more to all of this that no one is willing to speak on. He’ll get his fucking answers. And he won’t be killed either.

Soon, all the swirling thoughts in his head ebb into nothing, exhaustion from the day and all the info he’s had to take in finally dragging him under. And before he knows it, he’s asleep.

Zoro doesn’t usually dream. Or it’s rare that he remembers them.

He dreams tonight.

Confusing, vague.

There’s bright light everywhere, warm on his face, the sun so intense he can hardly open his eyes even when he shields his hand in front of him. He tries to squint between his fingers.

There’s laughter in front of him, light, gentle, playful.

He can see a swirl of hair, flowing in the nonexistent wind, swaying around the glowing, sunbeam crown atop his head.

Zoro's eyes *burn*. He fights to keep them open, even as he feels tears welling up in his eyes at the dry, intense light.

The person's mouth is moving, but he can't hear anything. Curved into a beaming smile, pale skin, sweet lips, unnaturally pink red eyes. The face draws closer to him, peeking at him from his cracked fingertips.

"*Hellooo?"*

The eye contact *hurts* and Zoro slams his eyes shut with a hiss. The face of the man is burned into his retinas. White glowing hair, gold that halos his entire form, a beaming smile with white teeth.

He feels fingers on his wrist, pulling his hands down. The back of his eyelids glow red, the light so bright that no matter how hard he keeps them shut, it keeps scorching him.

"*It's you*." Pounds in his head, reverberating in his own mind.

What's me? His mouth doesn't open. He has no tongue. No teeth. No lips. No mouth to speak anymore.

There's screaming, in the distance. Luffy.

Agonizing, horrible wailing. It tugs at Zoro's gut, like a jagged blade eviscerating his innards.

Zoro can't find what direction it's coming from. He turns around, this way and that, trying to locate his omega.

"*The Solstice*," the voice warns him, sunshine hot on the back of his neck.

Sweat bursts across his skin as the heat turns uncomfortable. Like laying out in the midday sun, knowing he's going to walk away with a sunburn.

"*It's you*. *You have to stay*." the voice warns him again, from inside his own head. Scalding. Too close to flames. He feels the hot line of a fingertip drag down his face, from his left brow, over his closed lid, to his cheekbone. Slicing. Carving.

Zoro winces, feeling the way one of his knees gives way. There are hands on his shoulders, squeezing, desperate in their grip. The light is so bright Zoro is certain he will be blind, even with his eyes closed.

He hears Luffy again, sobbing, his hollow, grieving voice reverberating in the space. Like death.

"*Zoro*," the white one in his head, warning bells, alarming in his head, lighting a matchstick ember of his fight or flight. His heart beats so fast that it's going to choke him, maybe explode out of his ears.

"*ZORO*," it pleads again.

He ends up bolt upright in bed with a gasp. The air is cold, and the room is quiet, save for a sudden clatter of a tray to his left and a woman's scream.

Zoro breathes like he's just run the entire Shimotsuki village, like he's just raced to the top of the mountain and back again without stopping.

There's a servant on the floor of his room, wide eyes, mouth agape, pale. A gold tray askew in her lap, and its contents scattered around her. A bowl with whatever liquid inside spilled. Rags. A cup.

The woman is trembling, hands gathering the knocked over things back onto the tray.

"L-Lord Zoro. B-Breakfast, the–" she cuts herself off, hiccuping. The smell of her fear is bitter. Zoro wrinkles his nose, shaking his head, it's only making his head hurt more. He can still feel that booming, loud voice inside of his skull.

"I'll take it in here."

"B-But–"

"Just bring me my breakfast here. I'll talk to whoever has a problem with it later. I have a headache."

She looks like she wants to say more, but refrains. Zoro doesn't mean to glare at her, but he wants nothing more than to be left alone right now. His alpha feels unsafe, looking for danger that isn't there.

He's never had a dream like that before. Has never woken up so violently, on edge, immediately reaching for his swords that were no longer there.

The servant gathers herself to her feet, all empty cups and bowls and unraveled rags picked up. Zoro notices that none of the liquid got on the carpet, just her. He can't even open his mouth to apologize for startling her before she takes a deep bow and scurries out of the room.

Taking a heavy breath, trying to calm himself, Zoro lets his face fall into his hands, scrubbing the rough katana-worn calluses on his palms against his face, rubbing at both of his eyes when the left one smarts.

It doesn't seem that long before another servant comes back with a gentle knock on his door. Or maybe he really has taken that much time lamenting how much of a fucking mess and whirlwind his new life is now.

He doesn't even bother to look at them, just listens to the soft set down of a tray on his table, and a gentle, older man's voice, "Your meal, Alpha."

"Thank you," he mumbles, rubbing his palms into his eyes again, and the door shuts with a click.

He's just getting used to everything, he tells himself. The elders here are weird and throwing him off, customs and religion that he isn't used to is fucking with his head, giving him weird dreams. All the fancy marble statues and reliefs in the palace depicting this Sun God, crowding his every thought.

Certainly, there is no truth to his dreams. He’s never had visions or premonitions before. This is surely no different.

Right?

Chapter End Notes

I am halfway into chapter 4 and have two big climax scenes from future chapters written out and am kind of writing in an odd cycle of each one and connecting the pieces backwards hahaha. The slow burn is slowburning, yall, but I promise some spicies next chapter (*-`ω´-) 人

Chapter 3: III

Chapter Notes

short, sweet, spicy, more dinners!!! our rating has bumped up to E finally! plz enjoy nyahaha ψ(๑`ω´๑)ψ

WARNINGS: Luffy brings up the past alphas he has been with, and the implied noncon and assault that came of their forced arrangements. It doesn't go into too much detail, but this may be triggering for some!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I’m sorry about dinner yesterday.”

The first words he hears from Luffy when he next sees him. A surprise.

It’s the afternoon now. The sun is beginning to lower from its highest point in the blue sky.

Zoro isn’t sure how Luffy knew where he was, he didn’t tell anyone where he was going after he finished his breakfast in his room alone. He actually didn’t see *anyone* after his breakfast. He wonders if the servants told Luffy or if he asked.

Zoro has been spending all day wandering, exploring, and victoriously, miraculously, finding his way to the gardens again.

The greenery, while not as encompassing and lush as his village, was enough to ease the ache for home. The scent from the flowers was different, but fresh and inviting, soothing. Trees and bushes and flowers he had never seen before. New smells, new shapes, new textures.

When he had first arrived, he noticed the few hands tending to the greenery, some with buckets of water, others pruning, and some with dirt up to their elbows as they weeded and tilled the soil.

The people scurried off quietly after they noticed him in return, each leaving with a silent bow of their heads.

He must have been out here for two hours before Luffy had found him.

All things considered, an apology was the last thing he was expecting from the omega.

He’s not entirely sure which Luffy is the real one. The poised and put together royal that he met on the throne the first day, or the bouncy, bubbly energetic omega that can’t keep his feet still. Which one of these is Luffy? And which one is the influence of Nika? To his understanding, Luffy is sharing this body and it is not entirely his own at times.

It is his first time seeing Luffy again since the awful dinner. And they’re alone.

He half expected either Ace or Sabo to be trailing after him.

Zoro is getting the impression that they follow Luffy like hawks. Overprotective of their little brother or the God they are in servitude to. Never one to leave Luffy out of sight for more than an hour or two.

So it's just the two of them up here in the quiet gardens. Zoro keeps his hands relaxed behind his back and looks over Luffy's guilt-ridden face.

"You didn't really do anything wrong."

Luffy nudges the toe of his sandals against the cornerstone of one of the stone pavers along the planter boxes, tongue poking out against his cheek as he pouts a little. Zoro follows the little bulge of his cheek, the soft angle of his jaw, dark curls framing his ears. Charmingly masculine despite being so... Pretty…

"I still left without saying anything. I should have stayed back and talked to Zoro more. There's some stuff that no one can talk about in front of the council except for me. And Zoro has a lot of questions, right?"

They begin to walk together, a slow, easy pace further in, Zoro just a half step behind Luffy. Deja vu, as he remembers a similar conversation and walk with Sabo yesterday.

"I feel that you seem to be underestimating my number of questions, Oh Holy Light."

Luffy's face scrunches and he flaps a hand over his head in dismissal, "Eugh. Don't call me that. All of those Sun titles are stupid. I'm Luffy. Just Luffy."

"Not Just."

Their steps come to a stop and Luffy looks over one of the open red and blue flowers, fingers gentle along its petals and stares into it, avoiding Zoro's eyes pointedly. They're completely surrounded by hyacinths in this section of the gardens, the scent is heavy but lovely in its own way. The flowers are lush, full, blues and pinks and purples and whites that have bloomed open and fluffy.

"Sabo told you?"

"Sort of. I get that there's more to the whole thing. You're the vessel for the Sun God Nika, and he sometimes takes over your body. The priests are all excited about it and want to keep you up here for their worship."

"They think that Nika will reward them for their devotion." Luffy says bitterly.

"Won't he? Don't most gods like that sort of thing?"

"What else do gods want for besides their freedom to do whatever they please? To feast and drink and party. Nika is no different. He will not bring anyone glory or riches or whatever else they pray to him for."

Zoro contemplates Luffy carefully, silently. Sabo told him that Luffy had been… with Nika for quite the number of years now. And despite the years of familiarity or at least companionship, the omega seems resentful of the God.

It is rare for mortals to become vessels of gods. But not entirely unheard of. Zoro is distantly aware of whispers of this happening in the ancient past. There was always some lesson tied to these

stories that he never bothered remembering. The one thing he did remember was that they always ended in death.

The epic tales were easy to get sucked into. The drama, the power, the tragedy. It's different being faced with it in reality. This isn't some bedtime story to ease him into adventure-filled dreams.

Feeling awkward, trying to get closer, or maybe ease Luffy's sour mood, Zoro rubs at the back of his neck just under the collar, surprised when he feels a sting of pain from the bite mark that Luffy left on him during his claim, still raw.

"You grew up here? In the temple?"

"Oh. No. Ace, Sabo, and I aren't from here. There is a village much further east," Luffy leaves the flowers, eyes tracing the sky off to the side, to the distant eastern skyline. Luffy smiles as if he's remembering something.

Zoro looks out and far on the horizon there's the faint ripple of the land beyond the palace, the tops of homes and buildings scorched under the beating sun. It still feels odd for him, to look out and not see any trees or forests in the natural surroundings.

"We haven't been allowed to go back since we were brought here. Ace and Sabo could at first, but they wouldn't go anywhere without me… I hope everyone is okay…"

"Your parents?"

Indifferent, Luffy gives a small shrug, "Don't know 'em. We were raised by Dadan and the bandits. Grandpa sent money a lot, but he was always working, didn't come around much."

Bandits? Zoro tries to picture it. The three brothers holed up in a shack with a bunch of petty thieves and whoever this Dadan person is. An absent grandfather.

It makes sense, if he puts his head to it. Luffy doesn't act like a royal. So that must be an act. Or Nika's influence. Sabo and Ace also don't act like they have any high-class blood.

"Guess that makes the both of us dragged here without any say."

"Zoro can leave."

Scoffing, Zoro turns, finds that Luffy has been staring at him, face serious. The teasing jab he has prepared dies on his tongue with the eerily calm, steady look of Luffy's eyes. Really? Is he being serious?

"Don't joke. Didn't those old guys say I would be hunted down?"

"Just because I can't be free, doesn't mean I can't give you freedom. I'm stuck here, Zoro walked in."

Luffy offers him a smile, an odd one, that doesn't reach his eyes, as he reaches over and tucks a small, blue flower from the bundles of hyacinths behind Zoro's ear.

"I know Zoro doesn't want to be here. I'm sorry that you were pulled from your home because of me."

“It hasn’t been horrible,” he admits, trying to somehow diffuse the situation. Zoro can only imagine the words Luffy has heard from far less than willing alphas that were here before him.

“Mm. Say that after Zoro has made it through the Sun Festival.”

“And what’s that?”

“Hrm, a celebration of the Summer Solstice. The whole kingdom celebrates Nika and there are parades and food everywhere. Zoro and I have to sit in the temple the whole day like statues. They bring all this food and treasure and we don’t get any of it until the day is over. The festival is a few days, but we can’t do anything the first day. It sucks. It’s horrible.”

“I don’t think you realize just how long I can sit in one spot. Do I get to close my eyes?”

Zoro gives Luffy a playful jab with his elbow. Finally, Zoro gets a smile out of Luffy. He can see the dull mood starting to ebb away the more they talk. Not to mention, Zoro is finding that he prefers to see Luffy smiling more than anything else.

“And anyway, I can’t celebrate the festival either? What would they do if I were to swipe some food for you? I’m just giving my offerings up to *The Solaris* .”

Luffy gags at the honorific but Zoro catches the light giggle that comes with it. He noticed Luffy’s attraction with food right away, that and it seems to be what he’s focused on for the festival. Surely there’s more to it in this weird cult kingdom than parades and eating. He might ask Sabo about it later.

“That’s right, what can they say to me? The whole day is for me.”

There’s a breeze that kicks up through the garden, rustling the leaves and flowers around them. The scent of hyacinths grows stronger, soft, spiced, sweet. In Zoro’s imagination, the flower tucked behind his ear grows just a little warmer with Luffy’s smile.

They meet again in the baths.

Luffy had excused himself after their walk in the gardens. Well, it was more of a rushed goodbye thrown over his shoulder as he ran off and wished Zoro a good rest of his day up in the garden. Something tossed over his shoulder as he was running in the complete opposite direction that he has to sit for a procession of prayers.

He didn’t realize he would have as much free time away from Luffy as he has been getting. Luffy apparently is quite busy, being held in gatherings of the priests, for nothing other than simple decorum and sitting on the throne while common folks came to give offerings and prayers.

He sees Ace and Sabo in passing as he wanders the palace, often times getting himself lost in the ridiculous labyrinth of hallways and windows that all look the same. Despite the handful of times he’s been shown around the place, it’s too easy to get turned around in here, who could blame him if he ended up somewhere completely different?

Most of his afternoon is spent getting lost and then trying to find his way back to his room and never reaching it before he runs into someone that helps him along.

He has a servant lead him to the bathhouse, despite all of his protests against being escorted. The servant regards him with an almost aggrieved pinch of her brows and brings up that Zoro tends to get lost easily, and it is just for her peace of mind to make sure that Nika's Alpha ends up in the right place.

Right place being *with* Luffy.

The door opens to the large entryway of the bathroom. The stone here is warm all over, the floors, the walls, the pillars that line the rooms. Steam wafts in the air in lazy currents, gathering at the high ceilings.

The entry way is lined with benches, a few towels folded at either end of them, some hung up on wooden hooks that jut from the stone wall. There are woven wicker baskets that are tucked under the benches as well, most of them are empty aside from one, which he notices the haphazardly tossed in clothes and sandals, gold bracelets and jewelry that are laid on the top of the pile like an afterthought.

Zoro dismisses the servant when she tries to help him disrobe. The coddling is stifling and he doesn't know how Luffy does it, having to stand and let himself be attended to for basic daily life tasks.

He supposes that since Luffy has grown up being treated that way, maybe it doesn't feel as odd to him.

Zoro piles his robes into an empty basket, easily slips the jewelry off his arms and wrists. Everything but the gold collar that stays locked around his throat. He gives it a testing tug anyway, grumbling to himself when it stays put as it always has.

Making his way into the baths, Zoro keeps an eye out for whoever is also in here. The next room past the entry is a shallow basin of water set in marble, steam misting off the glassy-still surface. It looks to be only enough to get in to his knees. There's baskets hung on hooks on the marble pillars that circle the entire shallow pool.

He steps closer, looking in and finding chunks of sponge, metal strigils, and dark brown vials of what he assumes to be oils. In every other basket there are lumps of soap and more brown vials, smaller in size, perfume maybe.

Zoro continues, passing this room to go into the next. Despite his nudity and the open windows along one wall, the rooms are all stiflingly warm. The steam that comes off the water wafts in the air, seeping into the marble surfaces, the coarse stone floors, warming them up too.

The next room he comes into is darker. There are no windows along the walls, but there is a single round opening in the ceiling that allows light to fall into the room from above. It leaves the edges and corners of the room shaded, but Zoro can make out the line of plants and palms that are broken up with lines of wooden benches and large decorative vases set upon marble pedestals.

In the center of the room, directly under the opulent skylight, is another pool of water. There are steps that lead into it, intricate mosaics of blue, white, and green tiles that swirl under the surface of

the water. There is a soft ripple of the water from the constant stream of small fountains at the far end of the circular pool.

In the middle of it is Luffy, standing directly under the beam of sun that is let in from above. The water laps gently just at his chest level and despite the coverage, Zoro sees nothing but skin under the surface.

Luffy catches sight of him before Zoro can fumble and turn around and leave. He feels his face grow warm at the obvious way Luffy's bright eyes roam him, a slow once over from head to toe, stopping in interest once on its trail down.

Zoro does *not* cover himself, despite the flustered knee-jerk want to. Luffy has seen him naked already. He's seen Luffy naked too. But he's not yet been stared at, nor has he had the chance to stare himself.

"Hi Zoro!"

"I didn't think you would be alone in here," Zoro offers after a small cough to clear his throat.

Luffy tips his head, "I kicked everyone out. I wanted to be alone."

"Oh, well I can–"

"No. You can stay. Come here."

Swallowing, Zoro hesitates where he stands. Luffy stares into him, waiting, obviously not used to being told *no* or any variation of the sorts. His eyes show just how confident he is that Zoro will obey him.

Still, he needs the encouragement, and Luffy extends a hand to wave him over, water dripping off his fingers. Zoro has no choice now but to step into the pool, holding his breath.

The water is warm, almost uncomfortably so, as he starts wading in, taking the shallow steps in deeper. Luffy watches him the entire time, a smile growing on his face as Zoro gets closer. Nervous, Zoro wishes he knew what Luffy was thinking right now. He's been hard to get a read on since Zoro arrived, not quite sure how to pin the omega's thoughts or intentions.

At times Luffy is serious, pensive or distant, but he's seen him at times aloof and almost naive in his speech or manners. How much of it is Nika and how much of it is genuinely Luffy? Who is he getting now?

The water laps fever warm against his hips and then up to his ribs. He stops an arms length and then some from Luffy. The omega cocks his head at him before taking a step closer.

Zoro is acutely aware of their height difference like this, where Luffy is looking up into his face with sharp eyes, daring him to move away. The scent of hyacinths blooms in the steam of the baths and Zoro realizes that it's *Luffy*.

"Do I scare Zoro?"

Zoro is an alpha. Luffy is an omega. He's bigger. Thicker with muscle, taller, stronger in every physical way. But he feels like he's the weaker of the two right now, feels like Luffy could easily crush him underfoot without much problem. Why is he so *nervous*?

“You’re not very scary, no.” he admits with a small tip of his chin.

“Zoro doesn’t want to be around me?” Zoro’s eyes dart to the side and Luffy leans over in that direction to catch Zoro’s eyes anyway.

The temptation is there, the smooth, tan curve of Luffy’s wet shoulders, how easily his eyes could slip from his collarbones to his chest, soft, dusky, little nipples that peek up from the surface of the water every time he moves…

Zoro shuts his eyes just to keep Luffy out of his sight entirely. Grumbling to himself when he notices his alpha under his skin suddenly taking interest in the proximity of the naked omega, wet and warm and pretty. So very pretty.

There’s a giggle in front of him, *close*, and then soft fingers taking him by the jaw.

“Zoro’s a funny alpha. Don’t want to look? Am I not attractive?”

There’s the problem, he thinks, you are *very* attractive.

“Where I’m from, we don’t have many omegas. And it’s not taken well to *bathe* with them…”

“Well, we aren’t in Zoro’s village, hm?”

“Not my point,” he grits out, shoulders tense when he feels Luffy’s thumb drag across his cheek, poking him at the corner of his mouth.

“Zoro is my alpha now. He’s allowed to look at me,” Luffy’s thumb pulls at the corner of his mouth, drags damp and warm against his bottom lip, “to touch me.”

Zoro opens his eyes.

Luffy is looking at his mouth, eyes dark and glittery, wanting. His thumb moves again, presses against the full of Zoro’s bottom lip, drags it to the side before pushing, pulling down and baring Zoro’s bottom row of teeth and gum line.

Zoro catches Luffy’s wrist, pulling his hand away from his face. He sees the split second of offense cross Luffy’s face, the pissy little pinch of his brows before Zoro dips in and kisses him, kisses his mouth shut against whatever complaint he was about to give.

The omega hums into the kiss, relaxes, and water sloshes around them when Luffy uses his free hand to take Zoro around the waist and pull him in close. Luffy’s hand rests low on his back, fingers teasing at the top of his ass, but Zoro is too focused on licking into the omega’s mouth to really be paying attention.

His tongue rolls up against the wet, warm soft palate of the omega and it earns him a small, breathy groan from Luffy’s throat. Fingers dig into his skin at his lower back, pull insistently until their hips meet. Luffy is hard, pressing into his thigh.

Zoro doesn’t let go of his wrist, despite Luffy’s pulling to try and get it back. He has a feeling he’d be handsy, distracting, and Zoro isn’t trying to get much more out of this than Luffy’s tongue in his mouth. Luffy may be more experienced here, but Zoro isn’t willing to let him take the lead.

Not easily, at least.

Although, he may have more trouble controlling the omega than he thought.

The hand at his lower back slides down slowly and the press of warm fingers between his ass makes him break off from the kiss, startled and his alpha bristling under the surface. His other hand snatches up Luffy's other wrist so that now he has got both held at the omega's sides.

Luffy just steps into his space and puts his chin onto Zoro's chest firmly, blinking up at him with a pout.

"I can't touch? Zoro kissed me first so–"

"I wasn't– I'm not trying to get sex out of you *here*. And that's–"

Luffy huffs, wriggling his hips to subtly rub his erection into Zoro's hip, subsequently grinding the soft side of his hip into Zoro's own, half-hard.

"We can go somewhere else," Luffy mumbles and Zoro can't help but tip his head down and kiss those pouty lips.

It works in distracting the omega, who finally twists his wrists enough that Zoro has no choice but to let go, ready to swat him away if he goes for his ass again.

But Luffy's arms circle around his neck instead, hugging at his shoulders and tugging him down to bend into the kiss more. And like a fool, Zoro bends, hands gently at Luffy's waist, almost afraid to touch.

Luffy bites at his lips, teeth and tongue and *wet* . Zoro feels out of his element, dizzy, growing more turned on with every roll of Luffy's tongue, every suckling press of his lips that seems to connect right between his legs. Luffy is taking the breath from him, setting his heart racing.

Overwhelming.

Surely this isn't how kissing is supposed to be like?

Zoro wouldn't know, this is his first kiss after all. How could he possibly think straight with the roar of their panting breaths and wet smacking lips and soft moans burning his ears?

Swept up in it all, he doesn't realize Luffy is bullying him backwards until his heel bumps into a tiled step under the water. He steps up, gasping as Luffy scratches at his hair, just behind one of his ears, and steps up after him.

Chases.

It isn't until there's a chill at his hips, the water at their thighs, that Zoro realizes that Luffy is taking them out of the water entirely. Or so he thought that was the plan. Instead, suddenly, Luffy has moved one of his hands again, and reached down to take Zoro behind one of his thighs and *pulls*.

He topples backwards with a yelp, fully expecting the back of his head to meet stone. This is it, finally, he will fulfill his fate of dying within the week just like all the alphas before him. Over something stupid as a freak accident in the baths, how *embarrassing* .

But no. He doesn't hit the ground, doesn't brain himself on the tiled corner of the pool. Luffy has caught him, in a surprising exercise of strength, an arm hooked under one of Zoro's legs while the other supports him at the waist.

"I've got you," Luffy laughs, bright and bubbly as he lowers Zoro gently to his back in the shallow waters, cradling the back of his head as he lays him back against the stone.

The hummingbird flutter of his heart in his chest makes Zoro question if this is real or not. What is he even *doing* ? He had a whole elaborate plan to woo the omega, properly court him, earn his place as a mate even if it was an arranged pairing.

Their first time would be in a lavish bed draped in white silk, flowers and gifts that Zoro courted him with. A sweet, gentle, slow first time as he held Luffy in his arms under him, made him forget every other alpha from before. Kissed every inch of his smooth skin, left his mark in teeth at Luffy's wrist and throat for all to see…

Luffy climbs into his lap, a purr low in his chest as he presses a hot, wet hand right in the center of Zoro's chest, leaning his weight into it to pin Zoro in place. His cock stands hard and heavy up against the curve of Luffy's ass.

Is he even breathing right now? Is that why he has such a headache right now? Breathe? Air? Maybe if he could– Inhale and–

"You're very weird Zoro." Luffy comments from above, lithe and relaxed shoulders dropping as he snuggles into Zoro's chest, rubs his erection across Zoro's abs in the same swing of his hips that he grinds back against Zoro's erection.

"All of the other alphas sent here have wasted no time in trying to fuck me." Luffy's fingers dance up his chest, fitting just under the golden collar with a gentle hold before the threat of his fingertips grow heavier.

"Dominate me. Force me into submission. The second we could be alone, they would want me bare and bent over for them, regardless of how close I was to my heat."

Luffy's eyes are searing, watching Zoro's face for something. He's not sure what he will find other than a red blush and confusion. Zoro doesn't know what to say. What *could* he say?

"You don't want me?" Luffy whispers, and the question feels loaded. Zoro remembers the pitch in his stomach every time Kuina's blade would swing towards his throat, stopping only a breath away, sometimes even drawing blood with the papercut thin slice that was unavoidable. That same, dangerous swoop hits him here.

Swallowing, Zoro's hands squeeze at Luffy's hips, just to ground himself. Not pushing away.

"I do," he mumbles, honest. He can be honest about this. He desires Luffy. Lust is easy, and his alpha has already deemed the omega above him as a potential mate, if not just a pretty thing to roll around with for a night.

Lips press into his feather light. Luffy's eyes never leave his, unblinking, watching him as he doesn't even flinch as Luffy's grip on Zoro's throat tightens.

“I want you, too. I like Zoro.” There’s a worried look on Luffy’s face, something Zoro can only pin as fear. Luffy shakes his head.

“I don’t remember my heats,” he whispers, a secret between them, on their shared breaths. Zoro breathes it in, steady, slow, “I wake up alone, always covered in blood, and always with an alpha *dead* in my room. Because of me.”

“Zoro has treated me better than any other alpha I’ve had. And I don’t want to wait for it to be too late before we can–” Luffy’s voice cracks, small and uncharacteristically vulnerable, even for the short time Zoro has known him.

“Not here,” Zoro says quietly. Not a rejection. He runs one of his hands up Luffy’s back, tracing the curve of his spine until he can reach Luffy’s face, thumb brushing the scar under Luffy’s eye.

“I’ve made enough promises to people that I’ll stay alive. I can promise that to you too. For you.”

Luffy suddenly scowls and the grip on his throat is uncomfortably tight now. He can smell the fear on omega, with how close his wrist is to his face right now, scent glands oozing his emotions even if he wasn’t trying to. Luffy’s eyes speak for him: *Liar*.

Struck dumb, Zoro doesn’t know how to convince him. Luffy looks like he doesn’t want Zoro to promise him anything. He knows that he’s scared though, under all of this false threatening bravado he’s putting on, like he doesn’t want Zoro to get too close, to give him hope that he could make it through this.

“You said it yourself, I’m not like those other alphas.”

Zoro reaches up, taking Luffy by the wrist, pulling gently, and the pressure finally eases up around his throat when Luffy lets go. Zoro rewards the action with his lips against the inside of Luffy’s wrist, one kiss and then two, before he opens his mouth.

Luffy’s breath hitches above him, strong thighs squeezing at his sides where he’s straddling his torso. It doesn’t keep him from dragging his tongue against Luffy’s scent gland, frowning at the bitter taste of fear, scraping his teeth against the skin like he could carve it out from the source and suck it from Luffy’s veins and free him from whatever scares him.

“Let me show you.”

There is a bruise on the inside of Luffy’s wrist when he finally pulls his mouth away from it, mottled red and deep purple. He pulls against it, drags Luffy’s arm over his head so that the omega has no choice but to come down to his level again. Chest to chest.

Releasing the omega’s arm, he braces his own around Luffy’s chest, holds him there and feels the matching rabbit-quick thud of a heart against his own. He tips his chin up, and Luffy meets him for the kiss he silently demands.

The kissing is less hurried now, less of Luffy *taking* and more of a gentle back and forth. Luffy’s hands dip into the waters surface, just enough to sweep back up over Zoro’s chest and get him wet again, the warmth of the water settling into his skin.

It makes Zoro groan appreciatively. His own hands are less touchy than Luffy’s. A rub of his thumb here, a drag of his hand over Luffy’s ribs, down to his hip, petting up his back again, rewarding him

with a squeeze of his fingers when Luffy would moan into his mouth.

The trickle of the fountains on the other end of the pool help to drown out the echo in the room of their breaths, the slick disconnect of their lips before Luffy tips his head and comes down to kiss him again, mouth open and soft.

Willing, easy, warm, as Zoro slicks his tongue into Luffy's mouth again, breathes heavy through his nose. It's a lot. He's too damn hard for Luffy to just be sitting wet and naked right on his lap, every little shift rubbing the soft curve of one of his thighs or his ass over the ache between his legs.

He said no sex here, not yet, not now, but his alpha is pacing back and forth in his head, huffing and growling with want. Zoro feels the tell-tale throb of his knot just above his balls, want that hooks low in his gut and scalds.

He keeps his one arm around the omega, and brings his other up so he can cup Luffy under his jaw, angle his mouth for a different angle, a smooth roll of their tongues that makes his cock jerk when he *feels* Luffy swallow the mess of their spit. It's a simple flex of his core to have him sitting up, and Luffy slides further into his lap with a low noise.

Better, so he can lean into Luffy more, use his height now to his advantage and suck at the omega's tongue without him drawing away, fingers tight on his jaw to keep him in place. All they would need to do is just, have Luffy sit up on his knees a breath, just a *little* and he could reach down and steady his cock to help the angle and Luffy would just need to sink down–

There's the very faint, distant sound of the doors at the entry of the baths opening. Zoro hears them and then the loud voice of Sabo,

"Luffy? Are you still in here?"

Fuck.

In a panic, Zoro takes Luffy at the hips and *shoves* .

There's a splash, a loud, panicked yelp that bounces off the marble around them.

At the same time Luffy surfaces from the middle of the pool with a loud gasp, Sabo comes rushing through the entryway with wide eyes.

Zoro sinks to the next level of the steps in the water, just so that his waist is covered and he can cross his legs enough to hopefully make his erection *less* obvious.

Luffy, dripping wet with hair in his eyes, mouth agape, gives a surprised shake to get the dripping bangs off his face and stares at Zoro incredulously, red in the face, "YOU–!"

"Luffy?! Are you okay?" Sabo comes to the edge of the water, careful to not get the low hems of his pants wet.

The omega coughs lightly, blinking his wet lashes quickly, still staring at Zoro who is pointedly not looking at *either* of them. He will *not* have Sabo seeing him like this. As his alpha, Luffy is different, hell, they just had each others tongues in each others faces.

He stands up, ignoring the slight chill of the room as he goes for one of the towels along the bench that sits closest to the door.

“Fuck *you!* Damn Zoro!” Water splashes and the spray surprisingly reaches him from all the way over here. Zoro hisses quietly, mostly to himself as he finally snatches the towel and wraps it tight around his waist.

He glances over his shoulder before rushing out, catches Sabo looking confused between the two of them, Luffy’s hand in his as he starts to help him out from the pool. Sabo doesn’t even blink at the fact that Luffy is still hard, where as the sight makes heat prickle at the back of Zoro's neck.

Zoro does not pride himself in running away. He has *never* run away from a fight or confrontation, Kuina practically beat that out of him when they were younger. It was fight, take it, or death.

But here. Zoro runs. A quick retreat of his feet as Luffy continues to yell at him, mostly profanities that don’t even sting.

He doesn’t even clothe himself, just snatches up everything out of the basket at the entrance and hightails it out of baths with his things clutched to his chest.

Running while hard isn’t easy, and neither is his brisk walk, but he makes it to his private room without even *flagging*.

Shit. Fuck.

He growls to himself, slamming his head back against the door he’s leaning back on.

He could just, reach down and take care of it. Could bring himself off fast and easy while he still has Luffy’s scent rubbed into his skin, the tingle of his lips raw, taste of the omega still at the roof of his mouth. If he closes his eyes, he can feel the phantom press of hungry lips on his, warm, strong fingers that rub over his chest, squeeze him at his neck.

Taking a slow breath, Zoro starts counting, tries to find somewhere in his mind to quiet the rush of his blood and the pacing of his alpha. Meditating will clear his head and calm him, surely. He just has to get there.

It takes him an embarrassingly long time to finally find his mind blank and muscles relaxed.

He’ll be good for Luffy. Good *to* him.

Dinner is interesting, to say the least.

Glaringly obvious, first of all, Zoro is late.

He arrives on his own and the worried but relieved glances from the attendants at the doorway make him wonder if any one thought to send someone to find him.

Inside, the same large table, elders and priests seated around it. Luffy at his place at the head of the table, and Ace and Sabo right at his side. Zoro’s place empty to Luffy’s right.

He is quick to cross the room and take his seat. He is fully intent to actually eat this time, no questions, no fuss, no looking at Luffy.

Easier said than done. He doesn't even succeed in that for ten seconds before the hand sneaking it's way into his lap makes his head whip around to Luffy.

Luffy pouts at him, "Why did you–"

"Alpha," an Elder cuts in, rude, bitter, "now that you have so kindly decided to join us, we must discuss Nika's upcoming heat."

Another elder makes a disapproving noise, scoffs, "what is there to discuss? Nothing will be different. He will spend the time with Nika, and we pray that he survives. He perishes, we send out for another unworthy alpha."

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves here," Zoro grumbles, glaring out across the table, "how about we discuss what happens after his heat. When I'm still around and you need to continue seeing my *unworthy* face."

There's a hush across the table immediately. Zoro sneers.

"Firstly, enough of the talking around us. We are *right here* . For all your worship there is certainly a lack of respect. Is he not your God?"

Luffy's fingers pinch him on the thigh, his voice small, concerned, when he hesitates, "Zoro…"

"You'll address either me or him directly, or you won't speak of us at all. He may be your God, but he is still human while he sits here and eats with the rest of you."

He is met with silence, but still, Zoro finds himself irked, he can scent the displeasure from many of the priests. He tips his chin up, defiant, challenging. He lets his pheromones leak slowly, a calm, steady dominating presence, claiming the room.

"What? Never had anyone talk back? If any of you have an issue with this, I have no problem taking my meals with L– Nika in private. None of *you* are necessary. There's a reason I'm here, right? For *Him*. Don't forget this."

One by one, slowly, he watches the priests lower their heads. The only one that speaks again is the elder just to Zoro's right.

"Apologies, Alpha."

"Not me." He growls.

Zoro catches the gulp the priest swallows, lowering his head further.

"Please, forgive our indiscretions, Lord Nika."

Luffy on his other side makes a startled noise, obviously flustered. Zoro takes a look at him, catches the way Luffy's surprised, wide eyes leave Zoro and focus on the man next to him. That seems to bother Zoro even *more*. That it appears obvious Luffy has never been apologized to before, at least by the priests.

He can see the way he's about to brush it off, the hesitant, wiggly twitch of his lips, uncomfortable with the sudden, odd shift in the room.

Zoro *stares* at him, finds Luffy's hand where it still rests on his thigh and pinches the thin skin on the top of his hand. Luffy gives a short little yelp, eyes snapping to Zoro before he flounders again with the pointed look Zoro bores into him. He doesn't have to say anything. Don't you dare dismiss this. Don't you dare brush this off, they will continue to try their boundaries.

"I-I accept your apology. Enough. Continue eating."

Satisfied, Zoro lets off Luffy's hand, which snatches away from him. Luffy glares at him, but it's not at all as scathing as he probably wants it to be. Zoro is riding the prideful, yet indignant puff of his alpha's chest. Luffy's little glare just rolls off his shoulder.

"Eat," he tells Luffy, who pouts his lips at him sharply, grumbles under his breath, and then shoves an entire leg of chicken into his mouth, gnawing.

"Back to business?" Sabo from across asks, with a clearing of his throat.

Zoro completely forgot about Luffy's brothers, sitting there silent for the whole exchange. When he looks at them, they both have matching, slight curves to the corners of their mouths, smug.

Ace points at him, eyes serious, but still smiling.

"Nika's heat. The topic of the meal, so fitting to eat over, don't you think?"

"Not particularly," Zoro sighs, but tucks into his plate so he can at least get something in his stomach before this blows up again.

"You actually are here the earliest of any alpha," Sabo explains, "Nika's heat isn't for another month. It's unfortunately supposed to hit right after the Summer Solstice. Which means it will be stronger than usual."

"If there was more we could do to prepare you for it, we would," Ace says, taking one of the empty plates in front of Luffy, and slipping a full one of the fruits to replace it, "the best we can offer you is the timing."

"That and the handful of days just before his heat, he tends to keep to himself in his room. Meals won't be held here at the table and temple duties will be postponed."

"Zoro will stay with me the entire time," Luffy states, demands. But Zoro can hear the plea in it.

"Of course I will."

"A more fun topic?" Ace suggests, "the Sun Festival. Preparations begin soon."

An elder across the table speaks up, "Alpha, you will have training for the festival's processions, dances, rituals, and dress."

"You will have education and practice for the majority of the day."

"About five hours," Sabo leans closer, whispering loudly.

“Don’t worry, we’ll feed you,” Luffy smiles at him, nudges him under the table, knee to knee.

“Wow, big offer from the guy stuffing himself with every plate he can get his hands on.” Zoro teases, nudging him back.

All it does is make Luffy snicker at him, cheeks bulging as he rips a chunk of meat off a bone.

“I can teach you, too,” he says, muffled with his mouthful.

Ace huffs, a quick laugh, “Oh please, you have zero rhythm. You dance like a *loon*.”

The elder seated next to Ace clears his throat in warning the same time Luffy barks ‘*Hey!*’. Zoro catches Ace’s subtle eye roll.

“Probably better than anything I can do. I’ve never danced before and I doubt I’d be any good at it.” Zoro confesses.

“And that’s what the practice is for. Even though it’s only a month, most of the festivities are simple enough and quite repetitive. Once you get the basics, everything will fall into place for you.” Sabo smiles.

“Except the first day. Boooring,” Ace tacks on and gets yet another chastising cough from an elder, a few glares from under the veils.

“The first day of the Solar Festival is ceremonial,” an elder at the end of the table, “You and Nika are there to symbolize the beginning of the celebrations. It is an honor to be there with Nika, and have offerings and worship bestowed to you.”

Luffy grumbles something under his breath while the man is talking, Zoro doesn’t catch it, but doesn’t need to to understand Luffy thinks the whole thing is bullshit.

The priests take turns around the table, explaining to him the significance of the festival, honoring Nika in his strongest season so that their prayers are more likely to be received. Traditions and how the festival has been ongoing for centuries. Age old tradition, appeasement of the Sun. Celebrations of the life giving and crop nourishing blessing that is the Sun.

At some point, Zoro notices Ace across from him propped up on his hand, eyes closed, mouth open. *Sleeping*.

Damn, he wishes he could too, but this seems important. Or about as important as it is to stay on the elder’s good side. At the minimum not offend them so much they just toss him from the kingdom without a chance of proving himself.

The babbling goes on and on, eventually taking on a tone of reverence, mostly the priests gushing over how honored they are to be living while Nika is within their presence, able to be worshiped at arms reach rather than the heavens.

Zoro can’t stop looking over at Ace, who’s face is sloooowly dropping off his hand. He’ll end up faceplanting into his half-eaten plate soon. Should he say something? Sabo and Luffy aren’t even paying it any attention, like this is common.

The elder next to him leans in, speaks quietly while the rest of the elders continue on.

“He has been cursed by Hypnos. Always falling asleep in the middle of anything, there are no exceptions.”

“Hypnos?” What in the hell does a god have to do with it? It’s nearly time for bed, Zoro doesn’t find it odd that Ace might be tired.

“Sleep. A very ancient God. There is no telling what he has done to deserve such a thing.” The elder shakes his head.

Suddenly Ace lets out a rumbling snore and his head snaps up eyes fluttering open. Without batting an eye, Sabo next to him takes a cloth and rubs away the drool from the side of his mouth before going back to eating his own plate, and assisting with keeping Luffy’s rotation of plates full.

Zoro does his own impressive cleanup of plates. Meat and fruit and well cooked dishes that are heavy and lovely on his palate. The elders don’t seem to eat very much from the stacks of plates that line the center of the table. These seem to be extras, slowly dwindling in number as Luffy and himself continue to eat.

The empty plates are seamlessly taken away by hands that reach around him from the side, quick-footed servants that have disappeared into the background before he can catch the sight of them. The table never stays cluttered for longer than a few seconds.

It’s satisfying. The first meal where Zoro has eaten himself stuffed, in what feels like *months*. He eats until he feels full, eats one more plate after that just to indulge, and then leans back with a happy sigh when he’s done.

“Finished?” Sabo asks.

“As much as I can be.”

“Good. Take tonight to rest well. Training begins tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow? I thought I had a few days.”

“That was before you mentioned how horrible of a dancer you are. The sooner the better, more time is beneficial.”

“I’ll come with you,” Luffy whispers, leaning in, only to whine when Sabo pinches his cheek, pulling on his face to seat him back on his cushion properly.

“*You* don’t have time to go play with your Alpha tomorrow: morning worship, the midday appointment with the seamstress to tailor your ceremonial robes,” Luffy grumbles, trying to swat Sabo away as he attempts to continue listing Luffy’s itinerary to the time of every pull of his cheek.

“Aside from all the formalities,” Zoro starts, “do I get to have any weapons training, too?”

“Hah!” an elder down the table scoffs, “what need would you have for wielding any weapon, Alpha? That is what the guards are for.”

Fighting to not narrow his eyes and growl, he explains, patience thin in his tone, “I’ve spent the last twenty three years of my life wielding a sword. Such a habit is not easily dropped. And as I’ll likely be the one closest to Nika in private anyway, wouldn’t it be beneficial for me to be able to protect him?”

“Nonsense. There are plenty here in the palace that will always be close by to you both at all times. And the gates for the kingdom have been shut off to any other kingdom for years. There is no threat here.”

Zoro can’t help the frustration that bubbles in his chest. There is always a threat. Trust is not so easily given to strangers.

“Should I remind you all that most of the outlying kingdoms who have had their thrones overturned have been done so by their own people?”

“Nika is our God and most high and holy. Who would dare wish to harm him?”

Finally, a growl slips his throat, “That way of thinking is precisely what I mean. Dangerous. You’re too comfortable thinking everyone here shares the same thoughts and worship as you. You think he is so safe? Why won’t you let him leave the palace?”

Silence.

Exactly. Just what I thought, he sneers to himself.

“Just let me sit in with the soldier’s training, then. I deserve to have a look at the skills of who will be protecting me and Nika, don’t I?”

The elder next to him sighs, hard enough to disturb the veil over his face, “Fine. You may *observe*. There is no need for you to wield a weapon, though. And you also will not be allowed to cut any time off your formal training and preparations for the festival.”

Zoro doesn’t roll his eyes, but it’s a close thing. There’s not a soul here that will be able to keep him from getting a blade into his hands again. If he needs to walk on eggshells to do it, so be it.

“Fine. Good enough for me, I’ve had too much free time on my hands anyway.”

“Guard training begins just before the sun rises, you will have a busy day tomorrow, hope you get enough sleep.” Ace smiles at him from across the table, but he doesn’t seem upset at all.

“I’ll make sure someone is sent for you,” Sabo adds in, also smiling, fond as he wipes off Luffy’s greasy mouth with a napkin, “Good luck.”

Chapter End Notes

I'll be totally honest, December has been very difficult and busy for me in my personal life (bad health news, my friend having a baby, work and holidays and general end of year hecticness), and I have not been able to focus as much attention to this fic as I wanted and thusly have fallen behind in writing out past the next chapter.

Fear not, the show must go on, and I will continue to push through to give you guys this. It miiiight just be a little slower than I planned, gomen

I hope you enjoyed the chapter! And Happy New Year to all my sweet readers, you guys are so awesome! ヽ(｡>ᴗ<｡)ノ♡✧゜･ﾟ★｡♡゜

Chapter 4: IV

Chapter Summary

He feels starstruck, entranced with the omega in front of him, glowing with the flicker of candlelight all around him, casting him in a warm glow from all sides. That bored, distant expression is long gone now, and Zoro is captivated by the teasing smiles and mirthful curve of the corners of Luffy's eyes. Like life has breathed back into him. This is the Luffy he knows, wants.

Someone from behind him clears their throat loudly, catches Zoro's attention. Luffy doesn't react to it, just glances between them, at Zoro's still unlit candle and then the calm flame in Luffy's.

Offering, yes. Right. Worship. Zoro doesn't know what to say, what to offer or ask for. He just angles his candle against Luffy's flame, waits until the wick is full and alive. In his head, he wishes for Luffy's happiness, wishes for the omega's safety and good health, a long life full of sun and his sweet boyish laughter. Freedom away from the shackles of the temple.

Chapter Notes

welcome back fellow readers!!! i wish i could scoop you all up into my arms and give you the biggest smooch ever. your comments are seriously so sweet, and give me so much motivation. (づ> v <)づ♡♡♡

I honestly did not expect this fic to be getting such positive attention, as the idea was pretty niche to me, or at least something I wasn't familiar with and thinking about how long it was going to be in order to flesh it out was so intimidating. A brainworm that wouldn't leave me alone and now we are all the way here, crazyyyy. Thank you guys so much, I seriously cannot say it enough, thank you thank you thank you!!

buckle in kiddos, it's getting real (•̀ω•́)✧

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The curve of the blade he wields slices through the tight bundle of wooden sticks. Some of the sticks splinter and the rope binding them frays. A few of the soldiers standing around watching ooh and clap for him.

Zoro instead finds himself glaring at the blade, wrong in his hands. The gold at the handle braces his knuckles, heavy at the hilt, but the blade itself thin and flexible, yet strong enough to cut through, obviously.

But nonetheless it's wrong.

The guards had nervously shuffled on their feet when he arrived and immediately requested a katana for training, glancing at each other before confessing that there was no such thing as a katana in this kingdom. Plenty of machetes, longswords, spears, cutlasses, but no katanas in sight and not anyone that even knew how to wield one.

The cutlass he has now is powerful, he will admit, but it's bulky, the balance is different from what he is used to, and the precision he can get with it is horrid. There is no elegance with this blade, meant only for destruction and aggression.

As promised, this morning a servant had been sent and woke him up before the sun came up. Bringing him a light breakfast which he scarfed down, eager to get to the training grounds and pick up a sword again.

He might have slowed down if he knew this was what he would be dealing with.

"Bring me something different. Without this type of guard," he gestures to the gold covering his knuckles.

He holds the blade away from himself, letting it go when one of the men takes it from him, bowing their head for him. Subservient in how he takes the blade with two hands and ensuring he stays lower than Zoro.

He tried so hard to establish an equal level with the men but they all refused, addressing him as Alpha or Lord. Upon his insistence that training brings them all together and puts them on equal grounds, they refused yet again. He figured he'd get an even stronger rejection if he brought up the suggestion that one of them spar with him or cross blades.

They bring him a longsword, a tapered blade that doesn't have the annoying knuckle brace. The hilt is still shorter and not meant to be two-handed, but as he gives it a testing swing he can feel the weight of the blade is balanced for power.

It would have to do, he assumes this is the best he'd get here.

"Bundles of sticks aren't going to help me with my form or footwork," he explains, turning to face the group of younger guards that all stand at the edge of the training grounds with stars in their eyes.

"I need a partner to train with," he can see the beginnings of them all hesitating, faces showing their rejection of the idea immediately, Zoro keeps in the troubled sigh he can feel in his throat.

"None of you could actually injure me, even if you were to go all out. Who here would tell on you anyway for training with me?"

Again, none of the men move. Zoro actually contemplates what would happen if he rushes the group with his sword, just to force a reaction of defense.

Surprisingly, one of the smaller boys of the group steps forward, meek, head lowered but eyes burning. Zoro looks at him and finds himself smiling, he admires the bravery.

“Good. Grab a sword and come over here, it’ll be good training for the both of us, I can teach you a few things even though your swords are shit.”

A few of the young men all hesitantly try and tell the younger to stop, that they’ll get scolded, that it’s not a good idea. It doesn’t stop the smaller one from grabbing one of the shorter swords from the sidelines and stepping over to Zoro, determined.

It catches the attention of the older group of soldiers training a few feet away as well.

The young man is a full head shorter than Zoro, dirty blonde curls that sweep against his shoulders, bright brown eyes and golden tan skin. Scraggly looking, but brave. Unpresented, Zoro scents.

“Your name?”

“Andreas, Lord Alpha.” Youth keeps the boy’s voice light, innocent, likely has never seen any sort of fight outside of these training grounds.

“*Zoro*,” he corrects, “While we train together I don’t want you seeing me as anyone higher than you. Don’t hold back on me, that doesn’t help either of us.”

The boy keeps his lips pursed together, not willing to speak Zoro’s name, but stares at Zoro regardless to give him his attention. Fine, he doesn’t have to be on a name to name basis, as long as he doesn’t defer to him.

Zoro raises his longsword, steps back and assumes a fighting position to start, blade directed for Andreas. He waits, allowing the young man to make the first move so he can understand what training the pup has had so far. Zoro watches him carefully and catches the way his foot comes off the ground to make the first step.

It’s wrong immediately, leaves him open from the very start, and Andreas’ blade doesn't even get close before Zoro is batting it to the side with his own blade. What bothers Zoro the most is the color of surprise that Andreas shows on his face, that it seems he really wasn’t holding back and the move was intentional.

Zoro quickly steps in, letting out a hum of approval with the swiftness that Andreas brings his sword up to protect himself, but it’s not fast enough. Zoro is at his side in a blink and his longsword against the side of his throat. He pauses, allows Andreas to yield by dropping the tip of his sword into the dirt underfoot before he pulls his own sword away.

“Your feet,” he starts, glancing down and giving Andreas’ feet a small tap on the inside of his heel to widen his base, “who taught you how to stand?”

A blush rises to Andreas’ face and he stares at his own feet like they’ve betrayed him.

“I take it none of you have fought in an actual battle? If the priest's claims of the kingdom being closed off for however many years is true.”

One of the young soldiers on the sidelines huffs, indigent, “Of course none of us have had to actually fight! Our kingdom is safe and no one would dare to attack the home of Nika.”

“Don’t be so sure. Territory and power is always coveted. And Raftel staying locked up tight only brings temptation to get at what is inside.”

“Alpha, the pups are still learning, they do not need to be masters at this age.”

The older group of soldiers have abandoned their own training across the yard and have made their way over. Zoro glances at them, sizing up most of them from his distance. They are certainly more rugged, muscular, and comfortable with their weapons in hand. Near all of them are alphas, from what Zoro can tell.

There is a man that stands slightly in the middle of the group, face serious and eyes thin. He isn’t the most muscular, nor the largest man of the bunch, yet Zoro fixates on him. He raises his longsword, tip pointed at the man.

“You. Train with me.”

“We can’t possibly–” one of the other soldier’s starts and Zoro cuts him off with a glare.

“How can I trust any of you to protect myself or Luffy if your ability to fight is subpar at best? *I* am certainly confident that I can take care of him whenever danger arises, but what use is having a bunch of soldiers that can barely stand their own against someone not even trying?”

The man he had picked out from before steps forward with a sigh. He looks irked, brows pinched as he takes the longsword at his side into his hands. The rest of the soldiers mumble to themselves but back away to the sidelines.

“I didn’t come here to sit around and watch you swing swords at the air.” Zoro assumes a defensive stance, staring at the man, a growl behind his teeth, “I came here to train and to keep myself sharp.”

The older man bows his head slightly in greeting, unphased by Zoro’s alpha posturing, the challenge, “I am Jason, sir. I will train with you for as long as you’d like.”

Jason makes the first move and Zoro is happy at the strength he can gauge from him immediately. The man is quick, and holds his sword with a loose wrist, but when he brings it down onto Zoro, who blocks him, the force rattles his teeth.

These swords, bulky and heavy as they are, are so obviously meant for power and clashing. A katana’s precision is not welcome here, where Zoro is used to a fluid, graceful flow that leaves him as lethal as water, these weapons are for explosive, aggressive force.

His alpha sings with the challenge and Jason definitely keeps up with him. Despite Zoro being new to this kingdom’s type of weaponry he finds himself giving Jason a hard time getting one over on him.

They make a full chase around the training grounds, swords clashing, attempts to get in close that are parried and returned. By the time they have come around again, cheers and calls of the soldiers in the distance, Zoro has worked himself up a sweat.

Finally, Zoro’s inexperience with these weapons catches him off guard. He slips back on a foot, a form fitting for a longer blade, lighter, curved. The sword in his hands is off balance for the swing he was going for, and it has his arm hesitating for half a second too late as his brain attempts to correct his swing.

Jason is a thunderclap of speed, in his space before Zoro can adjust again, and sweeping his legs out behind Zoro’s ankles.

His back hits the dirt with a solid thud and before he can even open his eyes he feels the point of a blade at the base of his throat. Panting, Zoro looks up along the silver weapon to where Jason stands over him, panting just as hard, sweat dripping off his chin.

Zoro smiles up at Jason, who looks at him with some level of uncertainty and confusion.

“You’re strong. You’ve fought before?”

“Only twice…”

Humble, but almost hesitant to admit his background in fighting, even though Zoro doesn’t know why.

“Jason is the Commander of our forces,” one of the soldier’s pipes up from the side.

“You won’t find anyone that can fight better than him. He’s from the Alabasta Kingdom.”

Interesting.

Zoro takes the hand Jason offers him, easily pulled to his feet.

The Alabasta kingdom was known for its good soldiers and warriors. A dry and arid place similar to this one. The Nefertari Royalty was one of the most well known and oldest families in the lands. They held strength and power for centuries, and for good reason.

“And you’re just here for…sightseeing?”

“I have sworn my loyalty to Nika. He saved my life and the lives of my men.”

Zoro glances at the group of soldiers still looking, a few of them look uneasy, while the others just seem uncomfortable. Before he can ask *why* , one of the younger soldiers speaks up.

“Alabasta launched an invasion attempt on Raftel a long time ago. Nika had just been brought into the temple as well, the year before. The soldiers sent to invade us had become prisoners and kept as labor slaves. Nika found out and practically turned the palace upside down until the men were set free and allowed to go home. Jason was the only one who stayed behind.”

Jason, who still stands before him, has a far away look in his eyes as he catches Zoro’s for a brief moment before he busies himself with checking his sword for any invisible nics.

“It was more complicated than that, but yes, the gist of it is as you’ve heard. Raftel soon after closed the kingdom off for good. I chose to stay, I am certain Alabasta would hang me for treason were I to return. I could not face them again even if trade and travel was allowed again…”

Zoro doesn’t know the full details, but he knows that defecting to another kingdom to join the enemy’s ranks wouldn’t be taken well in *any* kingdom. But it also brings up his trust. Could Zoro really put this man at his back knowing he had jumped lines once before. He could just be biding his time until the kingdom opens again.

A spy?

“I do not ask for your trust, Alpha. I know how it seems,” Jason says, lowering his head, “I will continue to carry out my duty in training these men to be their best to protect Nika. I am willing to

lay my life on this."

"All I need from you now is to continue training with me," he offers, keeping his skepticism to himself for now, "I have to go and play princess before lunch and my muscles aren't nearly as sore enough to put up with that."

Jason continues to prove his quiet nature, not offering Zoro any reply to this apart from readying his sword again, and assuming a defensive stance. Zoro charges him with lethal intent, and is not disappointed.

Showing up to his first tailoring and fitting scratched up and dusty probably doesn't look good on his part, but his arms and shoulders ache in a way that lets him relax as the servants around him preen over him with damp rags and worried glances at already scabbed over cuts and scrapes.

Zoro held his tongue against shooing the servants away, only because he didn't want to incur the wrath of the old omega grandmother that held a long pipe in one hand, and fussed over the fabrics with her other, muttering in an obvious way that if *the alpha* got any dirt on her fabrics she would have someone's eyeballs plucked out.

So here he stands, patient and still until he has been scrubbed free of the dust and sweat from his morning training. Not his fault they scheduled his training before the fittings.

They strip him down to his underwear and direct him towards the middle of the room.

The lighting here is brighter, as the curve of the windows along the far end of the room let in the most natural lighting. The room is tucked into a corner of the palace, but the walls converge into a semicircle at the far end.

There are tables lined up along each wall and a few scattered seemingly haphazardly in the middle of room itself, fabrics piled up on each, some folded neatly and categorized by color and textures, while others seem to be just tossed aside.

There are all sorts of tools and instruments lying about, various gold and bronze sticks, pins, and scissors and rolls of fabric with markings on them. There are forms of human torsos strewn about as well, scarce, but catching attention. Some of them are fully dressed with fabrics draped onto them, pins stuck along seams and holding different folds together. Whereas other forms are completely bare, just a smooth work of linen overlaid what Zoro can sparse to be straw inside.

A long, thin stick thwaps briskly under one of his shoulders, a sharp bite of a sting, reprimanding.

"Arms up, boy." The little old woman is hunched by his side, holding the switch-like stick in her hand.

Were it anyone else, Zoro would have growled at them, challenged them for their insolence, but this woman strikes an instinctual fear in him. He knows better than to talk back to any old ladies, the ghost of bamboo switches rapt hard against his knuckles during his lectures in the Shimotsuki village remind him of how ferocious a woman can be when she is up in her age.

His shoulders hunch, awkward as he holds his arms up away from his torso as commanded. The old woman clicks her tongue, using the back of her hand to gently stretch his arms out, spreading him to his full wingspan.

“This way. Do not move until I am done.”

“Yes ma’am…” he mumbles, feeling like he’s a young child, toddling at the knees of the village grannies for attention or snacks. It feels ridiculous, he’s a grown man and a well endowed Alpha.

Hell, he is *the* Alpha of this kingdom now.

The woman pulls a faded, off white strip of cloth from around her neck, holding it against one of his wrists and straightening it along his arm until she presses the other end at his shoulder. She takes similar measurements all over him.

The length of his arms, his shoulders, his back, around his waist, his hips, his chest. No part of him goes untouched and after each one she curtly says a number of measurements and one of the servants by her side but out of the way scribbles it down on a scroll.

There isn’t much to look at outside of the wall of windows he’s facing. Occasionally a bird flies by, and he can see across to an outside wall of the palace, less windows than this room, but there seems to be no life beyond it. Beige, warm sunlight, and sandstone.

Zoning out, Zoro doesn’t realize his eyes are sliding shut until there is a poke of wood into the soft skin under his ribs. The yip he lets out is *undignified* and he’d deny it until he’s red in the face, but the people in the room seem to ignore him entirely for their work.

“Stand straight. We’re almost done.” the little old woman grumbles at him, put out but not unkind.

Zoro doesn’t even realize he had begun slouching until he rights himself and rolls his shoulders back.

The old woman suddenly grabs a few folds of fabric off a table. They’re all plain, just varying solid colors folded over her fragile arm. Her hand has a tremor, though from the weight of the amount on her arm or just from age, Zoro isn’t sure yet.

She stands before him, puts her arm out against Zoro’s chest and picks through a few of the fabrics, holding corners up to the side of Zoro’s face, humming, putting it down and doing the same for another color.

After a few minutes of this, and Zoro’s continued silence and patience, the woman nods to herself and hobbles to one of the clearer tables.

She waggles her hand behind her shoulder, “I’m done for today. You may go.”

He could ask his questions, *that’s it?* But he knows better than to look at an opportunity sideways. He gives her a short, curt bow of his head, *obey your elders*, and hightails it out of the room.

Zoro doesn’t realize he had taken so much time, even missing his midday meal, until a servant bumps into him on his time wandering about.

“Ah! There you are, Lord Zoro!” A young man comes rushing down the corridor at him, out of breath and flushed in the face. He stops short right in front of Zoro, fidgets in place like he’s

gathering his courage.

“N-Nika was asking for you at lunch. He wanted to make sure that you have eaten if you were unable to come eat with him for mealtimes.”

“I had a big breakfast,” he says, and then smiles to himself thinking about Luffy with his cheeks stuffed with food and possibly watching an empty cushion next to him for his entire meal.

He’s not sure how to call it, the weird warm thing that sits in his chest when he thinks about that, of Luffy *missing* him, or at the least making sure he had eaten. The omega really doesn’t know him that well, that long, and yet his heart seems so big.

“If it’s that important you can bring some food to my room and I’ll eat after I walk.”

He leaves it at that and the servant seems pleased with that enough, nodding diligently before he rushes off the way he came after a quick, “I will let Nika know!”

It’s easy to fall into a pattern as the day to day becomes the same thing.

Wake up before the sun, train with the guards, dragged away for his morning fittings to stand in a room and let the old seamstress work on him and his ceremonial robes, have a quick meal after and wander the palace to find something to entertain himself, the gardens or overseeing the afternoon training drills for the younger soldiers.

He’s grown closer to the guards and soldiers, and at the very least has come to recognize most of them in the halls in passing or when they are on duty standing guard. Zoro counts it as important to *know* the men that will be guarding his and Luffy’s backs, even if it’s still a struggle keeping up with all of the names.

A week passes peacefully like this, Zoro finds his place in the palace, finds good companionship, men he could call friends.

Finds out just what Worship means in this Temple of Nika.

He stumbles on it one morning, completely by accident. Training was slow that morning, so they allowed the guards to have an early break. Zoro had planned to stay behind, continue to beat the straw dummies in the courtyard and train himself on the cutlasses and longswords, but Andreas had come up to him excitedly and pulled him away.

“Alpha, are you doing anything?” Ignoring the obvious training Zoro was attempting to bid his time with.

“Go play, pup. I’m going to use the full extent of my time out here before becoming a mannequin for the next few hours.”

Andreas shuffles on his feet, grabs at Zoro’s wrist with both hands, fully ignoring his dismissal.

“Come to The Offering with me!”

“What is that?”

“Nika’s Offering! We are allowed to give up our prayers and praises to him in person today. It is only every ten days. I bet Nika would love to see you there! I hear he talks about you often.”

Zoro tries to shake Andreas off, a gentle wave of his arm, but the young boy clings relentlessly.

“I’m his Alpha, of course he would talk about me…”

“No, this is different, *you’re* different. Nika has never talked about any of his alphas the way he does about you, the way he yearns to see you again at every moment you two are alone,” Andreas sighs wistfully at the end.

Zoro feels his ears growing warm.

He’s not put into thought what others might see his and Luffy’s relationship as. He hasn’t had to think that deeply on it, as all of the priests see him as an object, an animal kept under lock and chain, a tool for keeping Luffy’s heat under control so they can play their religious fantasies another year longer. The collar that weighs against his neck ensures he never forgets that.

He had forgotten that Luffy is liked by most of the patrons of the temple and the city of Raftel. The worship of Nika is not forced, though maybe brainwashed, Zoro guesses it isn’t all terrible…

That’s a new edge he never considered, being in the watchful eye of the public, as Luffy’s Alpha.

Should he conduct himself differently with the common people? Act like a normal doting alpha instead of a prize? Maybe the thick gold collar that stays locked around his throat doesn’t mean a term of ownership to these people. Not that he doesn’t enjoy being with Luffy, but can he truthfully say he *loves* him?

He still hasn’t been with Luffy as much as he wants to be, finding his alpha interested in the idea of seeing Luffy today at random rather than some scheduled out planned meal or palace activity.

He’s just curious, is all. Curious about what this worship could be like. It’s his omega, after all.

It’s how he finds himself here, trailing along behind an excited pup into the congressional hall, where there is a soft buzz of people remaining reverently quiet, but too many people talking all at once for it to be truly silent.

There are more faces Zoro doesn’t recognize than he does know. The guards posted in the corners of the room, the few priests at the head of the room, palace servants flitting here and there among the groups of commoners and city people.

Along one end of the room is a line up of tables, candles unlit in stacks neatly one by one, and next to them various baskets and neat rows of talismans made from braided weaves and wooden or stone beads. There are groups of people shuffling along from one end of the table to the next, picking up an unlit candle, some opting for a talisman, but everyone that takes a candle leaves a coin in the large basket at the further end of the table.

There is a neat line of people in the middle of the hall, four rows next to one another, shoulder to shoulder, slowly shuffling their way to the front of the room, funneling neatly into a single line at the front.

Zoro spots Luffy first, before he gets seen. Though, Luffy isn't exactly looking around the room.

The omega is seated on a round dais, surrounded by lit candles that flicker with every movement of the shuffling bodies in the room. Luffy looks bored, eyes lidded as he holds out his hands cupped together, a pile of soft wax in his palms that holds a single flame in them.

The line of people all lead up to Luffy, where they bend on a knee, make some odd gesture with their fingers against their heads, and then light their unlit candles with the flame Luffy holds before setting their candle somewhere among the mass of sticks that surround the dais.

Upon closer inspection, Zoro is surprised to see that Luffy is naked, under the folds of white cloth that drape his shoulders and puddle in his lap, the only thing concealing his nudity entirely. If the omega were to stand, or even shift a knee, he would be laid bare for the whole room.

There are markings on his skin, painted on with clean strokes of a deep red. A swirl of brush strokes against Luffy's collarbones, down his chest, framing the cage of his torso where an odd cluster of swirls sit like a ball painted over Luffy's belly. The red lines of ink are along his arms and legs too, circling his wrists and ankles, fading into intricate patterns on the back of Luffy's hands and feet.

Somehow, for whatever odd reason, this has his alpha grumbling. What need do these people all need to see Luffy naked? For how much they enjoy their extravagant clothes, shouldn't they be dressing him up like a doll, lavishing him with the finest fabrics and metal like a king?

Andreas bumps into his side quietly and Zoro is shaken from his quiet glaring at the frail old man leading a toddling pup towards Luffy with their unlit candles. Andreas smiles at him before he holds up one of the unlit candles in his hands, a wooden talisman looped around his fingers in his left hand.

"You'll go up to him, right? Offer your prayers or worship? He would enjoy seeing you at the least."

Zoro takes the candle and feels his mouth squirm. Uncomfortable. Wait, is he uncomfortable? Religion on this scale is foreign to him, the actual idolization of a being rather than nature itself as a personification. Zoro doesn't even believe that Luffy is a god, not to mention the entity that is possessing him. Would he just combust into flames up there for his disbelief?

He can't overthink it, circling his thoughts, as Andreas gently shoves him into line, and stays behind him to keep him from stepping back out.

The pace up to the front of the line is slow but steadily moving, closer and closer…

He notices that Sabo is standing a bit ways back behind Luffy with a guard and catches Sabo's eyes when he's halfway to the front of the line. Sabo's head tilts, surprise coloring his face easily read, eyes wide as he glances between Luffy and Zoro for a second before he smiles like he's discovered a secret.

Sabo is close enough to reach Luffy in an emergency, Zoro supposes, but not enough for him to reach out and let Luffy know Zoro is about to step up to him. Just out of arms reach.

Zoro watches the three people ahead of him approach Luffy, the same song and dance, a bow, a gesture of their fingers against their heads, Luffy's disinterested, distant, dissociative gaze, candles sharing flames, words spoke at Luffy who looks as if he doesn't hear them at all, and then the cycle repeats.

That is until Zoro steps up. He feels awkward, like everyone has figured him out by now, or at least has recognized him, and is scrutinizing every step he takes. He has nothing to prove, never had anything to prove to the council priests, and definitely not to these people, nothing to prove to Luffy…

Zoro takes a knee and finds his hand hesitating, unsure, halfway up to his head. It's enough to catch Luffy's attention, who's soft grey eyes slide up Zoro's form, boredom giving way to interest, intrigue, and then recognition when their eyes meet. Shock, pleasant surprise.

Zoro sees the way Luffy mouths his name and he feels like a flame is lit in his chest without ever needing to extend his into Luffy's hand. Just the curve of his lips around the promise of his name is enough.

The melted wax from the candle in Luffy's cupped hands has all but fused them together, and the crackle of white wax breaking when Luffy pulls his hands apart sounds loud between them. Zoro doesn't even know if it has caught the attention of the room, surely it has, but he doesn't know who is and who isn't watching them.

Luffy looks like he's fighting down a laugh, and Zoro watches the cute twitch of the left side of his mouth, struck suddenly with the desire to lean closer and nuzzle him there with his nose, or perhaps kiss that small curve. Luffy has proven already he enjoys kissing…

Teaching him how, Luffy's fingers are warm, guiding Zoro's fingertips up finally to his head, a sloppy, loose gesture of fingertips at his brow, down to his lips before Luffy lets him go with a smile and a whisper of the back of his knuckles on Zoro's lips.

He feels starstruck, entranced with the omega in front of him, glowing with the flicker of candlelight all around him, casting him in a warm glow from all sides. That bored, distant expression is long gone now, and Zoro is captivated by the teasing smiles and mirthful curve of the corners of Luffy's eyes. Like life has breathed back into him. This is the Luffy he knows, *wants*.

Someone from behind him clears their throat loudly, catches Zoro's attention. Luffy doesn't react to it, just glances between them, at Zoro's still unlit candle and then the calm flame in Luffy's.

Offering, yes. Right. Worship. Zoro doesn't know what to say, what to offer or ask for. He just angles his candle against Luffy's flame, waits until the wick is full and alive. In his head, he wishes for Luffy's happiness, wishes for the omega's safety and good health, a long life full of sun and his sweet boyish laughter. Freedom away from the shackles of the temple.

People have left their lit candles in Luffy's peripheries, all along his sides, some around his back, a few straying in front of him. The path of the steps in front of Luffy is completely empty. Unspoken that the path in front of Luffy is to be left clear.

Feeling a bit bold, Zoro leaves his candle there, right in front of Luffy, where if he were to hold his hands out again, the warmth of Zoro's flame would warm the back of his cupped hands. That every person from here on that would step up to Luffy would come face to face with their Sun and the guardian flame Zoro has left behind.

Zoro can feel Luffy's eyes follow him when he stands up and steps to the side to allow the rest of the procession to continue. Surely there must be a time limit to when the worship would end. He doesn't want to get in the way of things, he's caused enough commotion already by having Luffy move from his place on the dais. He's got a feeling that Luffy wasn't meant to be touched at all during this time of Worship, much less move on his own.

It's much more obvious now, that many people in the room are watching him, varying degrees of interest, scorn, amusement. Zoro feels the weight of it now, and he rushes along the sides of the room to exit without making any more commotion than he has, not bothering to wait up for the pup that dragged him here in the first place.

Embarrassed with himself, Zoro takes his dinner in his room that night. Wakes up and feels the weight of it somehow more. He was totally showing off, wasn't he? Showing off at an Offering. Showing off being more important to people who would fall over themselves to be acknowledged by Luffy the way he had did to him.

So he takes his breakfast in his room too.

He's not avoiding Luffy, no. Just, giving him a little space.

Zoro should have known he would have been hunted down sooner or later. There's no escaping Luffy, he is learning. The priests warned him of being hunted were he to run away from the palace, little did he know it might be Luffy himself that would chase.

He is on his way to the old seamstress granny, muscles sore from a hard morning of training, ready to stand in a room full of fabric and linen and letting himself be pulled this way and that for drapes of cloth tailored to him. Maybe get a standing nap in, like a horse in a stable.

He's only just stepped into the room, gained the attention of a few servants with armfuls of cloth and fabric, when there is a warm weight slamming into him from behind, strong arms around his waist.

"I'm taking Zoro for the afternoon!" Luffy calls into the room without any room for argument.

No one seems to be brave enough to argue it anyway. Except the granny who hobbles over to a table to take a measurement from a gauzy stream of embroidery.

"Very well, but you will actually sit still the next time I am fitting you, Young Man."

Zoro catches Luffy giggling under his breath before he gets drawn backwards slowly out of the room.

“Okay, okay! Thanks, Granny!” and then Luffy has latched himself onto one of Zoro’s arms, yanking him out of the room and down the hall quickly.

“Where are you taking me?” Zoro doesn’t actually care, more than happy to skip duties for a bit to go entertain whatever whim Luffy has.

“A secret,” Luffy pulls him along the maze of hallways in the palace, takes them deeper and deeper into the labyrinth, “Zoro can’t tell anyone, not even Sabo and Ace.”

“That’s a big secret to trust me with.”

Luffy’s eyes crinkle when he beams at him, and then shoots Zoro a wink before dragging him along faster, “You’re worth it.”

Luffy’s big secret turns out to be a crumbling hole in the wall in the damp, dark, lower levels of the palace.

It’s just a handful of the cobblestones pulled out of place, the old mortar crumbling at the edges, moss and damp green that might be mold growing on the edges of the hole from the moisture the tunnel allows in.

Zoro immediately feels his guard dog hackles rising, tempted to go immediately to a servant and demand this breach of security be fixed the next day.

But as Luffy pulls him in, and they crouch along the dirty, dark tunnel, Zoro doubts that anyone but Luffy and the rats would even know about this passage.

It leads them out to the back of the palace, along the dirt and weeds, overgrown. There’s actually a large thatch of brush and hedge along this back wall they come out to. The hole in the wall is small and low enough that it would be impossible to see from the other side of the bushes, unless one knew where to look and what they were looking for.

Twigs scratch at his skin, tug at his clothes, leaves straying in Luffy’s messy curls as they pop out on the other side of the shrubs. It’s nothing but a clear field that seemingly stretches for a long distance ahead.

Once Luffy shakes himself off from the dirt and twigs, he fixes his hold to take Zoro by the hand. Zoro chances his luck, adjusts their hands more and laces their fingers together. This earns him a smile from Luffy who giggles as he starts off in a run across the field without a single word of explanation.

Zoro keeps up easily enough, throwing a cautionary look over his shoulder at the back of the palace. There’s no one among the windows high up above to see them, and he notices that conveniently, there are no balconies on this side of the palace either.

Luffy takes him out for quite a ways, long enough for them to start heading down a hill and when Zoro checks behind his shoulder again, he has completely lost sight of the palace and the city of Raftel.

The dry grass has gained some color back to it, from brown straw to a heather green, ashy and soft to the touch, the length beginning to creep up to their knees the longer they walk. There's occasionally a cluster of weeds, flowering in yellows and whites, crickets and bees that flit off into the air as they pass by and disturb the grass.

The sky is beginning to glow a soft haze of pink and orange as the sun begins its descent towards the horizon. Zoro worries that they'll be walking back in the dark if Luffy drags him any further, yet he can't find it in himself to dig his heels in and make him stop.

They walk further, further, further, and Zoro accepts that maybe this is their escape. Luffy has finally decided to run away, consequences be damned, and they will just continue to run off into the distance until they come across a town or the ocean, whichever is first. Zoro can't remember what is actually out this way, all the maps in his head turned around into scribbles and useless pictures.

It isn't until another handful of minutes that Luffy stops. He looks out along the horizon, more grass as far as Zoro can see, the glow of the sunset that sends beams of golden-orange sun rays through the purple clouds. A breeze kicks up, and the rustle of the dry grass against itself is the only thing that breaks the silence.

Luffy takes a deep breath through his nose, eyes closing against the breeze as it ruffles his hair. Zoro finds himself staring, burning the image in his mind, Luffy's side profile, the glow of the sun on him, relaxed, a gentle smile on his mouth, soaking in the sun. Certainly he could stop the passage of time like this, live in this exact moment for another lifetime just on its own.

“It’s been a long time since I came out here,” Luffy starts, gentle, eyes still closed, “I’d sit out here for hours when it got too much. Everything.”

Zoro squeezes at Luffy’s fingers, still interlocked with his, a golden glow of sun in his palm.

Luffy finally opens his eyes, glances at Zoro and then away, shy as a soft flush colors his cheeks, “I’ve never showed this to my brothers, either. It was only ever mine.”

And now Zoro is witness to it too.

It feels like they have been teleported to another world. Or perhaps they have become the only two people left in this one.

Luffy suddenly drops back in the grass, no warning, just a drop of his weight as he lands on his back with a grunt, dragging Zoro down with him. The ground is a bit forgiving, thanks to the plush of the height of the grass. It swarms around them like walls, and Zoro can only see the whisps of the clouds above and the speckles of lavender and white flowers from the weeds around them.

Bright, pealing laughter comes from his side and Zoro doesn’t even wonder what’s funny. He can feel the joy that radiates off Luffy, sees it like a halo of sun around his face, bright. Luffy rolls over onto his side, an arm pillowing under his head and the other letting go of Zoro’s hand so he can reach over and trace Zoro’s face from temple to chin.

“What is it about me that Zoro likes so much? That makes you so nice?”

“Have you done something that means I shouldn’t be nice to you?”

Luffy snorts at him.

“I just mean, you’re different. Zoro is so *weird* . Weird Alpha… It's good.” Luffy pinches at Zoro’s cheek, like he can’t leave him alone, touchy.

“I like it,” he adds, quietly, and Zoro finds himself leaning closer to hear him better, despite laying so close already, the wall of grass around them protecting Luffy’s words from the wind. Luffy’s eyes catch his, a flutter of his lashes as he looks down, blushing.

“I like *you* , Zoro.”

“I like you too,” he nuzzles into the palm that rests on his cheek, dipping his face so he can nose the scent gland at Luffy’s wrist, inhales the spice of hyacinths and sweet earth.

All it takes is a shift of his weight, rolling over to put himself on top of Luffy. Their noses bump, and Zoro leads with his instincts, rubbing at Luffy’s cheek, the edge of his jawline, his alpha rumbling content and satisfied in his chest when Luffy tips his head back to allow him his throat.

“Maybe I *am* just like all those other alphas,” Zoro mumbles, gums aching as he huffs in the scent of the omega right against his nape, where he could easily let his fangs drop and claim, bite until he tastes blood and slick.

Luffy’s arms are warm around him, a solid brace around his waist, another coming up his shoulder and a steady hand that grasps Zoro at the base of his neck from behind, thumbing his short hairline. The omega hums low and easy, confident.

“Zoro couldn’t be. You’re not. Too soft.”

Zoro drops a kiss against the base of Luffy’s throat, feels the soft vibration of his breath under his lips, angles himself up to kiss the swell of Luffy’s adam’s apple, and then the soft place just under his chin.

He feels the dizzying rush of Luffy’s pheromones surrounding them. This close, Zoro is engulfed in the omega at the source, feels Luffy filling him entirely, and his alpha becomes mellow and warm under his skin.

“Don’t come to the Offerings anymore,” Luffy whispers.

“Why not? I’m not allowed to give you my offerings? I’m not permitted to worship my omega?” Argument, yet Zoro feels resolution in his mind. He won’t attend another Offering again unless Luffy tells him to.

“Zoro can do that here. Just us. Not in that stupid temple, when everyone that sees thinks you’re worshiping Nika.”

Nika never once crossed his mind, as reverence filled his mouth dripping wet, as admiration skipped across his tongue as he tasted the warmth of Luffy’s skin. The only Sun that registered in his mind was the one warming his back as it sunk below the edge of the horizon.

Luffy lets out a small gasp, hips jumping against Zoro’s, when he scrapes his teeth along the pulse of Luffy’s neck. The reaction is one he wants again, wants louder, wants directly pressed into his skull from his ears.

He cradles the back of Luffy’s head, tangles his fingers in dark curls and pulls with just enough pressure to keep Luffy’s head back as he drags his teeth along the soft of the omega’s neck again, catches the hummingbird flutter of his pulse against his tongue, and rolls his hips down to meet Luffy’s.

He will burn his worship into Luffy like this. The cradle of his arms, the comforting safety of Luffy’s sanctuary, surrounded by the freedom of nature and the sky for miles on end. His mouth leaves a bruise of a mark high on Luffy’s neck, slicked wet with his spit, an indent of his teeth.

Luffy’s fingers shake, a kick of his thighs as they close on Zoro’s hips, and Zoro raises himself up on his elbows fast enough to catch Luffy’s mouth with his own when he cries out. His alpha purrs, heat warming him down his spine from shoulders to hips, when he feels the kick of Luffy’s cock releasing between the folds of their clothes.

Just a little rubbing and kissing and he can have his omega cumming so easily? Aha, so his worship is worth something, like this.

Zoro kisses Luffy through his orgasm, sucks at his tongue and nuzzles against his cheek when Luffy pants for breath, chest heaving between them.

The world spins, briefly, as his back thuds against the ground and Luffy climbs atop him.

He sits heavy on Zoro’s belly, not even giving him the satisfaction of pressure on his own cock, still heavy and aching with want. He stays down as Luffy’s warm eyes pin him there. The omega looks pretty up there anyway, flushed, disheveled, the skin of his neck marred with Zoro’s affection.

“After the Solstice,” Luffy says, fingers running under the weight of Zoro’s gold collar, “before I go into heat, I want you to claim me. As Mates.”

“Not now?” It feels right now. He could coax Luffy up by his hips, have him over his head so he can lick away his release, taste him directly between his legs, leave a claim on the soft scent gland in the V of Luffy’s thighs before sinking his cock in deep and getting the back of his neck the right way.

Zoro’s cock twitches when Luffy growls at him, a flash of his teeth, a warning, his hand a solid, warm pressure on Zoro’s throat.

“If we wouldn’t get in trouble, I’d have claimed you before you ran away from me in the baths the other day. We can’t yet. That’s why after the Solstice. After the festival, the priests won’t object to it.”

He wants it *now*, though. Wants to have Luffy entirely to himself, wants to feel the thrum of his heartbeat in his own veins as his mate. The whole procession and waiting for the right time seems ridiculous to him.

Gritting his teeth, Zoro shuts his eyes, willing his alpha to not rip his own skin off, dropping his head back into the grass. Reluctantly, he admits his defeat. Submits.

“Fine.”

Luffy cups him under the chin, a thumb pressing against his bottom lip, and Zoro automatically opens at the request, is rewarded with Luffy’s tongue, and the wiggle of his hips back into his lap.

“Good boy, Zoro,” Luffy whispers into his mouth, fitting a hand between them, squeezing at the base of Zoro’s cock until he groans.

“Told you you were a good Alpha,” Luffy keeps talking to him, a mess of praise and condescending undertones of I told you sos. Somehow making sure Zoro knew just how easy he was making this for Luffy to keep control of him.

“Mmh, now keep proving me right and come for me, Zoro.”

Chapter End Notes

> giggling, screaming, kicking my feet, the field scene at the end is one of my favorites in this series and has been one that I have been DYING to write. It's like one of the big scenes that was vivid in my head when I first started this fic, I'm happy it came out so well and that we are finally HERE!!
>
> I hope this chapter was good for you guys! had a little bit more oomph in it right? ٩(´ᗜ`*)و♡
>
> EDIT: added a commission from Sen! thank you so much again for such a beautiful piece!

Chapter 5: V

Chapter Summary

> Luffy is acting strange and Zoro is struggling with his preparations for the Solstice as it draws closer and closer. And that stubborn, confusing Sun God once again...

Chapter Notes

> i hit a serious writers block in between a few scenes for this chapter but decided to cut some of the fluff that didnt contribute to moving the plot along, since it was giving me so much grief. so sorry again this took me so long (シ_ _)シ!!
>
> i hope you enjoy it anyway yippeeeee! ヽ(｡>ᴗ<｡)ノ♡♡♡

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It turns out, Zoro knew nothing about Luffy.

He didn't realize just how *greedy* that the omega could be, if given the opportunity. A door left slightly cracked open for Luffy to slam completely open and maybe crack the wall behind said metaphorical door.

It's like the floodgates open to full capacity.

It's overwhelming, when Zoro realizes that this will likely become his new normal.

Luffy comes to find him more often now. Zoro was used to long stretches of the day by himself. Wake up, breakfast, training with the guards, stopping by the seamstress granny, then having the rest of the day to himself to meander or find some company.

Now, it goes a little something like this:

Zoro wakes up with either Luffy entering his room with a happy chirp of "Good morning, Zoro!" or he wakes up alone, surrounded by the strong scent of hyacinths and sunlight, realizing there is something of Luffy's he wore the day before left for him on his chest or on the pillow next to his head.

So he wakes up with Luffy's presence now. It's not too bad and his alpha is finding comfort in the omega's claiming scent that greets him before he even opens his eyes.

Training with the guards is as per usual. Tough, fun, dirty.

His skills with a longsword are improving slightly, despite it only being a week. He doesn't make as many missteps or wrong distancing as he used to. His guidance of the younger guards and pups is increasing as well, and Zoro finds a comfortable companionship with the Commander, Jason. He remains wary of the man though, regardless.

And now, Luffy is either already waiting for him to finish training, peeking at him from the open archway of the palace at the end of the training grounds, or ambushing him in the lonely halls on his way to the tailor.

Usually, Zoro can pick up on Luffy being there at the grounds before there are outward signs. It's like his alpha is tuned in the omega now, where he is in proximity to him in the palace, as crazy as it feels thinking about it that way.

He gets this slight itchy warmth on the back of his neck, feels like the gold collar grows tighter ever so slightly, and then he typically catches the excited, giggling faces of the pups as they spot Luffy spying on them before Zoro can turn around.

Luffy asked, one morning, after their training had ended, if Zoro would teach him to use a sword.

"Zoro's the best fighter out there and a good teacher, you could just think of it like training one of the pups." Luffy tried, only to be shot down immediately.

"No," Zoro had cocked his head, working a stubborn water stain on the back-end of a blade with a soft cloth against his thumb, ignoring the whining omega pressed against his back.

"It wouldn't be dangerous if it was *Zoro* teaching me!"

Luffy nags at him, nuzzles the back of Zoro's neck like he's trying to be cute, until Zoro realizes that Luffy is *scenting* him. It's also now that he becomes aware that they are definitely not alone out here, a few of the men on the other end of the grounds are watching them.

"You don't actually want to learn how to use a sword," he gruffs out, halfheartedly elbowing Luffy behind him to try and get some space, only to have Luffy's arms comfortably wrapping around his shoulders tightly.

“Boooo. Zoro doesn’t want to play with me, mean Alpha” Luffy pouts, and Zoro shivers when he feels Luffy’s soft lips teasing the back of his ear as he whines at him in that annoying little voice that makes his alpha want to roll over and give him whatever he asks for.

Zoro can’t even tell Luffy to stop showing off, being possessive on purpose while there are eyes on them. Oh, the gossip will spread like wildfire, he’s sure, and Zoro already knows he’s going to get the teasing of a lifetime the next morning he comes to training with the guys.

It’s not just that; the subtle claiming around the guards Zoro has gotten closer to, is the least of his worries where Luffy’s overwhelming attention is concerned.

If anything, it’s the times of being yanked around a hallway corner and shoved into the wall for Luffy to kiss him breathless. Sometimes just satisfied with a quick peck, a tongue across Zoro’s lips before he has to run off to his own duties, but a lot of it is… *more*.

And this is where Zoro’s problem is.

Luffy is greedy for his kisses, greedy for the noises the alpha makes when he’s nothing but weak putty in his hands, the way his muscles all go slack when Luffy grabs him by the collar and grinds their hips together while simultaneously shoving his tongue down Zoro’s throat.

Greedy, greedy, *greedy*.

Luffy gets mad at him for the first time since Zoro had flung Luffy off him in the baths. It’s definitely Zoro’s fault this time, too.

Luffy had given him no warning other than a playful giggle perking Zoro’s ears, too late to react to and stop his feet, yanking the alpha around a quiet and empty corridor. He had nudged Zoro back into a dead end corner, a single, lone window being their only light, and the midday sun seemed to curve into the window to keep Luffy aglow.

Zoro had been fine with the kissing, the rough hands in his hair, tugging at his clothes to get at Zoro’s chest so Luffy could bite him and leave teeth marks against his collarbones, his nipples, the top of his abs…

And when Luffy made to get on his knees to drag that biting, sinful wet mouth *lower*, Zoro had finally flailed to grab Luffy under the arms and haul him back up.

Of course, this got him an upset growl in his face, and Luffy’s pouting lips, which turned away from him when Zoro tried to kiss him in apology.

“Not here,” Zoro had said, and Luffy’s glare could have crumbled the bricks off to the side if it were physically possible.

“No one’s even *here*, just wanna taste Zoro a little.”

“Aren’t we supposed to wait until after the Solstice to–”

“Since when does Zoro care about what the dumb priests want!?” Luffy had wiggled in Zoro’s arms, grumbled and fought his hold until he could finally get distance between them.

“I just don’t want to rush this. I don’t want to rush it with you.” Zoro admitted, not mentioning that Luffy’s brothers would likely wring his neck if they found out Luffy and him had been romping

around the palace for the past two weeks.

“Waiting, waiting, waiting, if I hadn’t actually made you cum before, I’d think Zoro was impotent!”

“Luffy, *please*?”

The scowling, pouty mouth gets further away from him, and even though Zoro brought this on himself, he still feels wronged about it, feels the way his alpha whines in the back of his head and wants to yank Luffy closer.

“Zoro’s gonna be late for his tailoring,” Luffy barks at him as he turns on his heel and stomps off down the empty hallway.

“Hey–”

“Zoro’s gonna also miss dinner, too? Always avoiding me,” Luffy’s grumbling echos down the hall as he gets further away.

Zoro quickly crosses the space in a few strides, grabbing Luffy’s wrist before he can get any further away making himself upset without Zoro able to explain himself. He’s not expecting the omega to whirl on him when his feet can’t move forward anymore, Luffy yanking at his wrist in the same breath he hisses, little fangs bared in a warning.

It’s when he catches Luffy’s scent, different. Not his usual turned on and excited about being near or on Zoro. This one smells… heavier. Like the sweetness of the omega has deepened into something more mature, heavier, cloying.

“I’m not avoiding you, Luffy. Really. I promise. I just want to do this the right way.” He tries, pulling the hissing, snarling omega in by his arm slowly, expecting to get bit for it.

Zoro relaxes his control on his own pheromones. It feels like the right thing to do, he doesn’t know what’s going on with Luffy, but maybe, he can be a small comfort for him. Unfortunately, it feels like Zoro has been saying the same thing these few days. *Waiting, right way, not too fast*.

He doesn’t want to sound like he’s running Luffy in circles, but the omega keeps testing him, pushing the boundary for more, like he can make Zoro give up and give in sooner than he wants.

Not to say Zoro would particularly mind. He’d love nothing more than to take Luffy now, mate him and say screw it to the rest of the palace, the kingdom, and anyone else that could come between them. But this is bigger than them. This is bigger than just keeping the peace of the kingdom.

“Oh– There you two are.” A different voice from down the end of the hall. Zoro looks away from Luffy’s flushed and angry face, finding Ace there instead. Immediately, Zoro’s alpha rears to alert in his head.

The other alpha stands there non-threateningly, slouching, both hands shoved deep in the baggy black trousers he wears with nothing else on. The beaded scarlet necklace on his chest clinks softly in the pregnant silence between the three of them when Ace tips his head to the side to look at them oddly, nose wrinkling for a second, scenting the air.

“Were you two–”

Luffy grunts shortly, with attitude, breaking Zoro's hold on him easily when he yanks his hand down and then turns away, stomping off in the other direction. He slips past Ace and the corner with a fierce swiftness that Ace raises his eyebrows at.

Zoro feels sheepish, like he'd just been caught with his pants around his ankles, despite being well clothed thank you very much. He just hopes there aren't any kiss marks on his throat, that he doesn't look as disheveled as Luffy tends to enjoy making him when he kisses him stupid these days.

"Smells like *someone's* in their preheat. Eugh, brat." Ace hisses down the hallway with a click of his tongue, likely staring down Luffy's back.

Preheat.

Ah, of course. That makes so much more sense, now. Luffy's increasing clinginess, the reckless possessiveness towards people Zoro wouldn't even consider as a partner even if he wasn't courting Luffy already. The moodiness and hotheadedness from the omega all starts becoming more clear.

"Sorry about him," Ace turns his way now, features softening, into something more of a tease as he gives Zoro a pointed once over, "you haven't gotten to experience the full force of Luffy in his preheat, huh? Don't worry, it gets worse."

"Great," Zoro groans inwardly, nerves flitting under his skin. Worse. Like this wasn't Luffy at his peak. That this behavior could somehow amp up to *more*.

"You'll be better off laying low, bribing him with snacks, yknow?"

"Luffy comes to find *me*. I have been laying low," Zoro huffs. There isn't much more *laying low* he can do, without it coming off as avoiding the omega. He's sure that would blow up in his face even worse than this, if Luffy learned Zoro was actively avoiding him.

Ace gives a halfhearted shrug of his shoulders, like this isn't any issue to him, while Zoro is losing his mind inside. His alpha had perked at the mention of preheat. It means Luffy is due soon, that he will need to be taken care of, protected more than usual, coddled, *touched*.

Zoro feels a thorny sort of irritation rising in his chest, when he thinks about Luffy seeking another alpha out to help his heat, despite every indication pointing towards Luffy wanting Zoro.

"Hey, don't worry about it too much. Luffy will get over it eventually. Now, how are those dance lessons coming along?"

Zoro feels his mood sour, shifting, as a new but equally as worrying subject is brought to his mind.

"Don't get me started," he grumbles.

Dance lessons, as he dreadfully figured out, were like a new form of torture. Gone was psychological warfare that preyed on insecurities or phobias or what have you. This was a different mind game and physical beating.

His first impression was an absolutely terrible one, by Zoro's standards. He'd gone to the seamstress granny as usual, but was surprised to see the room entirely empty. Surely he wasn't forgotten right?

But then, a servant had come racing down the hallway out of breath and flushed in the face, eyes widening as she saw Zoro standing around the fitting room confused and aimless.

"Lord Alpha! Ah- my deepest apologies, please forgive us, it really is *our* fault for not–"

He held up a hand, stopping the painful beginning of grovelling that he still hasn't been able to teach out of the servants towards him.

"Your fittings will be now replaced with your dance rehearsals. As the Festival is soon, we have not enough time to allow you to see the end of your ceremonial robes being made and teaching you our dance customs, so…"

The servant continued on, looking pale and sickly the longer she talked, head bowing further which each second. Zoro seriously didn't know what more he could do differently to have the palace servants be less scared of him.

But it was beginning to feel less that they were scared of him as an Alpha, and more so about his importance to *Luffy*.

It seemed significantly more probable as these weeks had gone on.

It was glaringly obvious, confirmed even, towards the end of his dance practices.

He had spent days watching and mirroring different dancers, tripping over his own feet, always complaining about his feet aching from the wooden floors.

But now, this day was different. He was to practice with a partner. The much older man that had led the teachings and education of the recitals, simply clapped his hands and told them to pair up.

Zoro had stood patiently in the middle of the room, uncaring who ended up being his partner for the practice. Everyone else in here was much more knowledgeable and talented at the dances than he was, and they could lead to show him the right way…

Except no one approached him. Zoro watched the other people huddled together, whispering among each other looking nervous.

Gods above, was he *that* bad? He had thought he was at least somewhat improving…

"This is absolutely absurd," the instructor had barked at them all, pointing to the group huddled together with the long, thin stick he always kept in his hands, "partner up. *Now*."

In a scramble, Zoro watched his fellow classmates all find someone amongst themselves, staying shoulder to shoulder and some even tightly holding one another's hands. The only one left unpartnered was a taller woman, nervously looking around the paired groups like she could find someone solo.

"You'll be a perfect choice, you're a beta," one of the classmates whispered at her, giving her a small nudge with her hand.

“Just because I cannot smell–”

“You! Come now, pair up, enough talking and more dancing before I lose my patience.”

And so, that was how Zoro had paired up with a reluctant partner for his practices. A disaster again as she was hesitant to touch him. It was necessary for the small hand to hand parts of the choreography.

He’d stepped on her feet one too many times, embarrassed apologies a near constant from his mouth more than the breaths he was apparently meant to be counting to keep timing of his steps.

Too much to think about honestly. Wasn’t dancing supposed to be freeing and fun? So he’d heard, not that it was something he had any sort of interest in…

He imagined Luffy taking these sort of classes would be exponentially worse than his own experiences. Luffy would likely be doing his own thing, wild limbs and giggles and probably something ridiculously silly.

Zoro doesn’t realize he’s smiling thinking about the fantasy until the girl in front of him clears her throat.

They complete a rotation, fingers held a breath away from each other in the air by their shoulders. Zoro feels a little flustered, mostly because the stare he’s met with is quite judgemental…

“Please refrain from thinking about whatever you were just thinking about,” she mutters stern but with an air of nerves, “I would rather not have your scent on me.”

Zoro *almost* reacts. Offense jerks his alpha’s head up. He certainly wasn’t *scenting* her, nor would he try to. As he opens his mouth to at least explain himself and maybe get some more information out of her, she cuts him off.

“I cannot smell you, or the pheromones left on you from The Solaris. But I have enough mind to make friends with those who can warn me,” she gives him a hard look, and Zoro almost misses his next three steps, but her small feet between his forcibly guide him back into step.

The instructor at the far end of the room claps sharply, signaling the drumbeat that they are to use to switch pace. Their footsteps become quicker, and everyone must precisely step and lean exactly as taught or they risk bumping into each other. Their rotation switches to the other direction, and Zoro folds a sweaty hand behind his back formally as he was taught to, raises his other hand for the girl to mirror him and guide him into a spin as they dance backwards.

“It is obvious that He does not wish anyone near you. It has been getting stronger these past few days.”

Zoro *has* noticed something a bit different, he cannot lie.

The gifts left in his bed in the mornings are stronger, sweeter. Linen pants and undershirts that have obviously been worn in the sun and worn during *strenuous* play or exercise, though Zoro does not imagine Luffy ever intentionally *exercises*... Luffy’s scent sticks to them intensely anyway, dried sweat and warm sunshine. It’s infuriatingly enticing to Zoro, but he supposes that this sentiment and pull cannot be shared with others.

In the quiet, lonely minutes of his mornings when he is still held down by the hands of Sleep, Zoro rolls over in his bed and sheets and buries his face in Luffy's offerings, nuzzling, mouthing along the seams, shamefully swinging a leg over an extra pillow and imagining that it's Luffy under him instead.

"I have been told that it is so strong on you that the scent is almost like a *shove*," she continues, pointedly and gracefully avoiding any contact between them as the dance spins them to be closer, they are the only two in the room not touching, "Like Nika himself is keeping a barrier around you."

Zoro swallows against the rising buzz of energy, nervous and guilty all at once even though he's not even done anything *wrong*. Zoro has been too comfortable lavashing in Luffy's scent he entirely forgot that other people around him would likely be put off, especially if he was smothered in the scent of an irritated omega in preheat.

Before Zoro can open his mouth to offer some sort of apology, she's cutting in again, controlling the conversation the same way in which she does their dance, footsteps light but unyielding, and Zoro is helpless but to trail along.

"It is not a problem I am asking you to correct, Lord Alpha. We are all servants to Nika and His wishes are unquestionable. I merely wish to express my concerns, for *my own* safety—"

Safety? Confused, Zoro misses his next step, bites his tongue when he stumbles and accidentally steps on her foot, feels his gravity swoop under him as their momentum continues—

She is surprisingly strong, catching him at the hand and yanking just hard enough to keep his ass off the floor before she lets him go like he's scalding. He might as well be as he comes to terms with his embarrassment, Nika's influence runs hot over his skin, and Luffy's scent has blanketed him so strongly that even betas are apparently worried about the smallest brush of contact.

"Lord Alpha, I mean no disrespect to you," she bows her head slightly, nothing but formalities as she continues to speak, sharp brown eyes meeting his, "Your Omega has left a clear stake on you. I do not wish to come across His jealous path. He treats you like no other alpha I have seen brought to our kingdom. I have a healthy fear of The Solaris and the wrath he can bring if there were some misunderstanding that I wished to be closer with you. I hope you can understand."

Zoro feels dumbstruck for a moment. Clarity strikes him suddenly.

"Luffy isn't *dangerous*."

"*To you*," she hisses back at him. It is now that the room has grown quiet, all eyes turned to them.

"Nika has killed before. His own alphas, who is to say he would not kill someone lower than a mate?"

Rage is white hot in his veins. Zoro growls, a low rattle of the room that makes many who are watching suddenly cower back and drop their heads. The woman in front of him still meets his eyes with steely conviction. She is convinced that Luffy would *hurt her*.

"*Luffy* is not a killer, and certainly not over something as mundane as you touching me for a dance practice."

Silence falls between them, Zoro stares at the woman, and her eyes remain hard, disbelieving.

Zoro feels an itch under his skin, the way his alpha burns just under the surface.

“Insult him again and I promise, Luffy will not be the one between us that you will need to be scared of.”

Word gets around *quickly*. Just as Zoro had suspected, everyone is a gossip, and anything in regards to himself and Luffy is juicy and spreads wild.

It’s only the next day, the next *morning*. It hasn’t even been a full twelve hours, and Sabo is greeting him as he trails through the halls to go to training.

“So I hear you’re threatening servants now,” the blonde hedges carefully, amusement in his tone.

Zoro rolls his eyes, itching for a sword in his hands so he can spend the next few hours beating into strawdummies and slicing dried bamboo.

“I’m not *threatening* anyone.”

“Not what I heard.”

“This whole palace is,” Zoro searches for the right words in frustration, but can’t find them, and spits “rotten.”

Misguided. Eyes shaded and minds warped. Hearts so obviously in the wrong place where it concerns his omega.

“Zoro,” Sabo says calm but firm, and it catches his attention enough to pause his steps. Sabo stares at him for a second without saying anything.

“I appreciate you standing up for my brother. But please, do not make enemies among the people of the palace. They don’t know better.”

“I have been here for less than a year and I can see clearer than the people who have lived here their whole lives? When does this cross from pure ignorance to a willful blindness to the truth.”

“Are you not worried for yourself?”

“Luffy won’t hurt me.”

“So confident,” Sabo places his hands behind his back, Zoro cannot read his face or what he must be thinking, “But he could. I cannot deny the fact that Nika is stronger than Luffy, during his heat especially, and that he *has* been the death of many alphas before you. We cannot lie to people and say that this is not happening.”

“It’s not like he *wants* to—”

“If he wanted to or not, does not cross the minds of those that serve him. All they see is the blood on his hands, the number of corpses around him, and the priests that continue to push him onto a pedestal none of us can reach.”

“What is your *point*,” Zoro growls, finding his irritation rising.

“My point, is that I love my brother very much. We have worked very hard, *carefully*, to maintain the peace that we live in now. I do not want to make enemies of the people we must live with.”

“It sounds to me like you don’t want anything to change. You’re okay with Luffy not being free?”

Zoro finally catches a hint of *something* in the blonde’s face. In the way his eyes widen, worry coloring his features under that hard edge of ‘concerned older brother’.

“I want nothing more than for Luffy’s freedom, but that will not come from scaring the servants around you.”

“You’re seriously lecturing me right now for *defending* Luffy?”

“Not a lecture. Just a word of caution. A palace cannot be built in one day.”

Zoro turns, finally walking away from Sabo and their conversation, but not before responding,

“No, but it can be torn down within one.”

The moon that night is full, bright, larger than usual, almost with a pink glow to its edges. Zoro finds himself tossing and turning in his bed, unable to settle his mind.

He turns, pulls a pillow against himself and tucks his face against it, where he’s dressed it with Luffy’s offered clothes. If he closes his eyes, he can almost imagine that the omega is laying here with him instead.

He’s not sure where one breath has begun in the waking world, and when the next comes with the sands of dreaming.

When he opens his eyes, it is to the moon having drawn almost closer to his window, and the pink glow to it has washed it entirely so that the moonbeams falling over the room are rose-tinted.

In his peripheral vision, he spots a glow of white. Pure moonlight. But when he turns to catch it, a light giggle hides behind his shoulder with a whisper of a breeze.

“Zoro,” Luffy’s voice comes from behind, light and gentle in a way that he is certain the omega is smiling. Beaming.

He tries to turn again, wants to see Luffy, but as he spins around, he is met with the long, daunting climb of the stairs leading up to the palace. He had walked these same stairs coming into the kingdom.

The moonlight has dimmed around him, almost eerie in its glow, illuminating the pristine sandstone steps.

From above, high up in the palace, there is a scream.

“Don’t look.” A whisper calls to him from behind, a voice like Luffy’s again, but lighter.

Nika.

Zoro stares up the steps, heart a heavy, cold stone in his throat. That was Luffy screaming. His mate, in trouble.

His foot rises, takes the first stair of the palace, and sunlight wraps around his wrist, warm but desperate.

“*Don’t look*.” It begs.

A gut wrenching sob shakes the air, pain lancing every inch of his body when he hears Luffy wailing again, so loud and horrid that the stones of the palace tremble, sand falling from every corner.

“You must not go. You must not let him away from you.”

The warmth on his skin spills off him like water when he breaks off into a sprint, climbing the stairs of the palace three at a time. The tall, open entry is pitch black. It feels that no matter how hard he runs, no matter how many steps he climbs, it does not get any closer.

Suddenly, dizzyingly quick, he reaches the top faster than his mind can comprehend it. He stares into the inky black void beyond the entry, hears Luffy screaming again, a name that he has heard before, and a blinding flash of white-hot sunlight exploding from the inner depths of the palace.

It streaks from between the stones, illuminates the sky in a solar flare of radiance that Zoro can’t look at, finds himself closing his eyes again with the pain of the light and heat. It knocks him back suddenly, and Zoro topples backwards, head first to the steps he just climbed.

As he is certain he will split his head open on the sharp edges of the stairs, that same warm cradle of light takes him behind the neck, slowing his descent until he is laid back on a soft cloud.

He still cannot open his eyes, too bright, too warm, even as the touches caress his neck, his cheeks, brushes hair back off his face.

“Zoro. You cannot leave him. Please.”

The drop of a tear on his face only makes Zoro turn his face against the hand against his cheek.

Who? He cannot find himself to ask, as grief fills his chest and begins to pour up from his throat in ragged, chilling thorns.

Please. Tell me who. I will. I will stay with him, just tell me who.

The tears continue to fall, a light pitter-patter on his skin, and then the heavens above open, and the warmth of the sun is washed away by the torrential floods of rain. Ice cold, bone chilling. Soaking him.

Zoro shoots upright with a bolt of dread. The sheets have all been kicked off the bed in his tossing, and he is entirely drenched in sweat, can feel it dripping down his neck and spine. His chest heaves, gulping down air like he had somehow forgotten to breathe.

He brings a hand up to his face and is shocked to find warm tears on his face, eyes burning.

And even as the room is barely lit with the beginnings of sunrise, Zoro notices the band of red around his wrist.

A sunburn.

Chapter End Notes

nervously scuttling away,,,, the solstice and luffy's heat begins,,, we are,,, in trouble now,,, (。> ﹏ <)

art from beginning of the chapter is commissioned from @toraoenjoyer! ty for such a cute piece!

Chapter 6: VI

Chapter Summary

> the day before the solstice and finally, *finally* luffy gets zoro under him gods bless (͡° ͜ʖ ͡°)つ

Chapter Notes

> i rise from the dead, coughing, covered in dust (and suspiciously blue hedgehog quills)
>
> hello my dearest beautiful little bugs, i am soooo sorry this chapter took foreverrr for me to get to. I wrote the first half of this in september, and then???? Sonic the Hedgehog happened to me??? ahem...anyway....
>
> this is where i give you the reminder that this is fiction and so painfully unrealistic for many many things. i'm the author and what i say goes and you will not question me! ٩(๑`^´๑)۶
>
> lol i kid,,,, no but, in case it wasn't obvious already, this fic pulls VERY heavily from japanese, indian, and fantastical ancient greek cultures. nothing is meant to be realistic nor accurate by *any* means. not even close. clothing, religious practices, and rituals are all inspired by these rich and beautiful cultures but are also not meant in any way to be a one to one accuracy of these practices or fashion.
>
> alright, alright, enough of me yapping, i know you are all so eager to get back into this fun crazy story, i made sure this chapter was extra jam packed for you guys as my apology for taking months to update (つ╥﹏╥)つ

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Breakfast is a bit different from the past week that Zoro has found himself having. For one, there are no priests at the table.

That’s more than welcome, however, neither Ace nor Sabo are there either.

It’s just him and Luffy. Of course and the handful of servants standing back by the doors, bringing in plates of food as quickly as Luffy puts them down. Piles of rabbit and chicken and stone fruits and dates and pastries spread out like a banquet.

Despite all the open space, the way the room feels tight and small is starting to smother Zoro’s weak appetite.

Luffy glared at him on the way in and when Zoro got close, he kicked out a bare foot and stretched his leg out as far as he could, pushing Zoro’s seat cushion quite the distance away.

Petty. Zoro would find it cute or even amusing were it not for the way his alpha under his skin snarls at the gesture. He's a little too hyperaware of the sweet smell that lingers in the air, one that rivals the honey and syrup laid out in bowls for them, dripping off Luffy's knuckles when he stuffs a pasty slathered in honey into his face and chews with a glare.

Zoro's more primal side understands the omega before him is about to go into heat. Wants nothing more than to be close, to pamper, to stake his claim. Luffy has done enough these past few weeks to make it obvious that he's interested, through touches, kisses, glances.

The attraction feels electric, a pull that Zoro didn't find very hard to resist, leaned into quickly, and now that he's on the edge of giving it back, Luffy no longer wants him close.

Feeling petty himself, Zoro gives Luffy's stretched out leg a glance down his nose before he makes his way around the table. Behind Luffy, watching the way that he watches him in return, hovering over plates protectively.

Before Luffy can figure out what Zoro is doing, he kicks a seat cushion against Luffy's other hip and drops himself onto it. Before Luffy can get his other leg that way to block him.

"Hey!" Luffy barks at him, obviously vexed that Zoro has found a way around his attempt at keeping him away. Too easy, really.

"What?" Zoro teases, *testing*. What are you going to do about it? Zoro thinks. If he wants to be near *his* omega, who would dare to stop him?

The bratty behavior seems to just invigorate him, give Zoro the confidence to try annoying the omega. Honestly, what *is* he going to do? He certainly doesn't seem in the mood to jump Zoro's bones like he was before.

Luffy of course is too focused on the food, pre-heat mood swings or not.

When Zoro reaches forward to grab something sweet, one of the various fruit-filled breads laid in front of them, Luffy growls and cuts in front of his reach, snatching up what Zoro had gone for and shoving the *entire thing* into his mouth.

Zoro stares, impressed mostly at the audacity and bravery to snatch up an alpha's food. But then again, who is he to Luffy? Luffy who is functionally this kingdom's *God*. Luffy is also just a shackled up omega thrust up onto a pedestal for things completely, entirely out of his control. For things he cannot change about himself. Cannot get out of himself.

Feeling bold, and a little annoyed, Zoro growls low in his chest before he reaches out and grabs Luffy by the jaw, turning his face towards him. Luffy growls at him in return, a small omegan warning muffled by the ridiculous puff of his cheeks. It doesn't ward him off and Zoro leans in, licks off the flaked crumbs of puff pastry that clings to the corner of Luffy's lips.

At the same time his other hand is sneaking two of the pastries off the piled-up plate, while Luffy turns a wonderful shade of peony-pink and leans away from him, furiously chewing his mouthful while touching his lips where Zoro's spit still lingers.

Funny, that the little spitfire can be so easily flustered. When he was once so firm and stone-faced when he'd cornered Zoro in the baths, naked and propositioning himself so *easily*. Then again, Zoro knew that wasn't Luffy. Not really. Not his true intentions. Just a test.

Zoro has spent plenty of time mulling over Luffy's past experiences. There's no question about it. It's just a fact. Luffy is more experienced than him, though to his dread Zoro knows this isn't by Luffy's choice.

It doesn't change that it is still true. That Luffy knows his way around an alpha's body, has had numerous mates before him, and Zoro isn't fucking stupid, Luffy has dropped enough hints that they have all had one thing on their mind. Have had it, *taken it*.

His alpha stirs, somewhere in the back of his mind, somewhere dark, pitch, sour, hissing that it is glad those other alphas were all dead now.

There is a clatter of plates and silverware as Luffy takes both arms and sweeps them over the table, making a mess as he bear hugs as many things in front of him and tucks them to his chest.

"Zoro can't have any!" Luffy yells, still bright in the face and glaring.

Smug, Zoro shrugs a shoulder, leaning back on one hand as he takes one of the stolen pastries up to his mouth and takes a bite. He chews carefully to not laugh at the way Luffy's eyes widen, frantically looking down at the plates in front of him like he's taking count and then stares at Zoro's bitten into pastry.

"You're so thin, there's no way you can eat *all* of this," Zoro says around his mouthful, taking another bite.

Luffy *is* thin. Lithe. But not in a way that makes him look like a demure little omega. The allure is there, sure, the way his tan skin is softer around his hips and belly, but there's muscle under those shoulders and arms that gives away his training. Zoro wouldn't mind plumping the omega up though, and his plan certainly works when Luffy hisses.

"Watch me."

And begins to shovel plate after plate into his face.

Zoro watches with content, happy to make sure his omega is eating plenty. He doesn't need as much, Zoro can make due with his two stolen sweets and an egg. He also manages to steal a strip of bacon but when he tries for a second, Luffy quite literally snaps his teeth at him.

"Okay, okay, slow down," Zoro smiles, licks the grease off his fingertips as Luffy continues to impossibly plough through the breakfast spread, "You can have all of it."

Luffy is still eyeing him warily before mouthfuls, chewing fervently, cheeks bulging. Zoro reaches towards the middle of the table, bringing the last couple of plates closer, piles with carefully sliced apples and grapes and pickled olives leftover. He takes a few for himself, before offering out an apple for Luffy.

The omega is finishing off the last of the chicken on the plate in front of him, but reaches out for the offered fruit greedily and with sticky fingers. When Zoro pulls it out of his reach, Luffy's eyes narrow.

"Forgive me," Zoro says quietly. It isn't a command, but a plea.

Luffy's hard stare shifts, confusion, then something softer. He doesn't answer, eyes flicking back to the slice of apple in Zoro's fingers.

"I did not mean to upset you yesterday," even if it felt inevitable. Zoro doesn't voice *that* though. Knows that Luffy's slightly more volatile than usual.

Still, Luffy says nothing. Zoro feels a little anxious now, confidence wavering until Luffy looks at the bowl of apples and then the one in Zoro's hand again.

His chest feels tight, but with a resigned sigh, Zoro extends the apple out to Luffy again. The omega watches, licking his lips, but eyeing him warily like he's ready for Zoro to tug away like before.

Luffy leans closer, keeps watching the apple and Zoro's face. Eerily silent through the whole ordeal.

Please, Zoro thinks. He's not sure what he would do with himself if Luffy *stayed* mad. Even if it was over something… petty. Insignificant? Is denying Luffy sex insignificant? Would it really have been so bad to just… Once. Quickly. Hidden in a corridor no one walked by.

Luffy opens his mouth and Zoro expects him to lunge for the apple in his fingers, maybe he'd get nipped in the process. Zoro is fully prepared to be bit.

He's not prepared for Luffy to stop right before his hand and wait.

Lips parted softly. Open. Lingering.

Zoro thinks about Luffy on an altar in white, melting candles in his cupped hands, awaiting offerings, prayers, devotion.

Zoro closes the distance himself. Places the apple on Luffy's tongue and drags his thumb across that plump bottom lip as he pulls back.

"I *am* sorry," Zoro says again, determined but soft, against Luffy's stubborn silence.

He idly takes a grape from the bowl in front of himself, offers this to Luffy as well, who opens up again easily, eagerly.

A grape, two, then three, and another apple slice.

Luffy lets Zoro feed them to him slowly, one at a time.

The fruit lingers on Luffy's breath, a sticky sweetness that is soft, pretty, enticing. Zoro finds himself lured in, offering everything until the bowls are empty and Zoro hasn't had a single taste of the fruit himself.

There's the ever growing bloom of hyacinths. Honey. Hypnotizing.

Zoro doesn't realize he's reaching into an empty bowl until all he touches is the cold condensation. He blinks, feeling like he's floating when he glances at the empty fruit bowl—

Luffy is taking him by the wrist, bringing his hand up and licking his dripping fingertips clean before Zoro can react. He teases with his tongue, teeth gentle when he nips, and Zoro finally makes

a noise when Luffy's lips seal around the two digits he's got a hold of.

Luffy suckles at the tips of them, doesn't go any further than the first knuckle but just that is enough to scramble Zoro's brain. Luffy nips again, a sharp sting of teeth eyes bright as they stare directly at Zoro.

Maybe he'll just… keep biting… sharp pressure and *hunger* until Zoro's fingertips snap and Luffy quite literally swallows him down. There's a weird, nervous but undeniably hard throb between his legs that Zoro *pointedly* ignores as Luffy pops off with an obscene little slurp.

Zoro's wet fingertips still brush Luffy's pouting lips when the omega says, "I forgive you," and then leans closer. Zoro can't stop staring at Luffy's lips, the way his mouth opens, tongue wet and pink and pressing out—

Zoro catches the way Luffy patiently glances at the bowl of olives, and instead of kissing the omega like Zoro's alpha is howling for, he's putting two of the little black olives on Luffy's tongue. He hums, pleased, chews while he crawls closer until he's seated sideways in Zoro's lap.

"Mm. Bitter," Luffy purrs, all soft sinew and knobby knees slipping into Zoro's lap.

Zoro readjusts all too easily, leaning to let his omega take his throne. Luffy curls into the space between his chest and the table, and happily opens up again when Zoro offers him another olive.

The next olive is held between them and Zoro can't help but smile to himself watching Luffy lean in to take it, only for Zoro's mouth to catch his instead. It's wet, sticky, and Luffy obviously isn't ready for a kiss, too much tongue and spit and—

He's rocked off balance, when Luffy grabs him around the shoulders and practically tackles him to the ground backwards. *Now* it's less a grab for a treat from Zoro's fingers. *Now* it's a claim. Luffy's nipping teeth on Zoro's bottom lip until he opens wider with a growling complaint of pain, Luffy's tongue licking in deeper, honey-sweet and fruit-tang on his breath and hyacinths that makes Zoro's head spin, clinging to the omega's waist and hugging him in tight and—

"Ahem, not to ruin your *breakfast*…"

Jason. The man stands at guard on the far end of the empty table, eyes pointedly downward as he waits. He is dressed in the most fancy garments Zoro has ever seen him in, all clean white linen, no roughed up sandals, no ragged training worn fabric.

The most jarring, is the white veil over his face, the same that the priests wear. Gold metal looped around the ears, silken white draped off his nose and cheeks to his chest.

Zoro feels himself flinch, trying to pull away only for Luffy to hold on tighter with a hiss.

"*Leave*," Luffy snarls, a surge of pheromones in the air so heavy Zoro feels dizzy from the proximity, even if the ire isn't directed at him. Honey-hyacinth sticking his mouth together, gagging him, he can't even breathe–

"My deepest apologies cannot change the offense I have caused, Nika, Alpha, but the Council is preparing for the Offering. You must go now. I have been sent to *ensure* your presence."

Luffy's displeasure doesn't seem to be affecting Jason any. He remains a solid statue, at parade rest, shoulders squared, large, unmovable. Unflinching, even as Luffy's scent sours.

Zoro still hasn't even been able to get a word in but Luffy is standing off him with a grumble. Gobsmacked, Zoro stays where he had been placed on the ground, unable to do anything but watch as Luffy rounds the head of the table, stomping towards Jason.

Ah. The knife on the table is now in Luffy's hand and–

Zoro doesn't know how he managed to get his numb legs under him but he's catching Luffy by the wrist as he's just a pace away from Jason, scent flaring. Calm. Easy. Gentle. Zoro tries to let his pheromones overtake, a subvocal noise in his chest to soothe.

The fool that he is— Zoro truly believes the man's loyalty now as he realizes Jason fully intended to stay in place even as Luffy came at him ready to harm— Jason remains unflinchingly, *stubbornly* in place.

By some miracle, Luffy doesn't try to fight Zoro off, just hisses at the guard again and leans stiffly into Zoro's chest as the knife is ever so carefully pried out of his fingers and tossed back onto the table by Zoro.

"Yes. We were just finished eating. Your timing is… astonishing, Jason. Thank you. I'm sure every *second* of the day is planned out for us, isn't it Luffy?"

Zoro wraps a protective arm around Luffy's waist, protective for the commander Zoro has only recently befriended and would very much like to not have his blood on the floor. For good measure, Zoro rubs his chin against the top of Luffy's head, ruffling the dark hair, scenting him, maybe a touch too heavy as the force of it stings.

It's enough to calm Luffy down though, or at least quell this heat-inflated anger. The stick of pre-heat still hovers around him in a loose, hazy halo. Zoro is trying his best to not grind against Luffy's back, though he's sure that to the omega it's obvious that he's hard.

Jason's head bows deeper, not once has he yet to raise his eyes. The white veil over his face flutters with his breath.

"My most sincere apologies again for interrupting you Nika. If you'd please," he steps back, an arm outstretched to the open door behind him.

Surprisingly, Luffy turns, a small circle in Zoro's arm before he nuzzles against Zoro's jawline and *keens*.

"I don't wanna go," is whined at him, *pleading*. Zoro has never heard Luffy speak to him like this, in a way that's akin to something like begging, like deferring to Zoro for permission, like Zoro would puff his chest and bark at anyone to go away as long as Luffy was the one asking for it.

Jason's eyes falter, Zoro can see the twitch of one of his eyebrows, even when the man keeps his gaze down in submission with Luffy right there. Corralling a Sun God cannot be done by one man alone, Zoro finds this to not be any surprise.

With a nuzzle against Luffy's temple, Zoro bends to kiss against Luffy's browline, the side of his nose. Another subtle, gentle, preening subvocal thing in his chest before he wheedles.

“Do your thing today, play dress up, pretend, and you can have me all you want tonight.”

A promise whispered between the two of them. Zoro has done enough waiting, hesitating. The official Solstice festival is tomorrow and it seems Luffy’s heat is nipping at his heels, and dizzyingly, Zoro feels like time is slipping through his fingers like sand.

He can’t explain the anxious twist in his gut that it’s a calm before the storm. A held breath before the drop. Zoro needs to… should… take advantage? Do something before it all blows up in his face. Whatever that may be.

The days are long and his nights are longer with dreams that he doesn’t remember, waking up worn out, exhausted, drenched in sweat like he’s spent the entire night running. Chasing. Fighting.

Luffy’s scent loses a bit of that sharp, sour edge to it, and he purrs quietly in return, even as he pouts and twists and clings to Zoro, pawing at his shoulders, his chest, grabby and rubbing Zoro with his cheek to make sure that pre-heat sweet sticks.

Zoro catches him under the chin, pulls him into a kiss, and then firmly sets his hands to Luffy’s hips to push him back an arms distance.

“Jason.” He says, feels his alpha under his voice. A command without needing the words. To keep his omega safe.

Zoro is okay leaving Luffy for this, he’s spent *years* doing this routine every year. The only difference this time around is that now Zoro is here, privy to all of the stupid rituals, offerings, worship trapped within four walls. That under all of it is just a warm, loud goofball that would rather spend his time rolling around in an empty field in the sun with Zoro, giggling over the bugs clinging to the tall grass as he points out all the fun shapes and creatures he sees in the silhouettes of the white clouds above them.

Zoro remembers days and days ago, Luffy bringing him to his safe place, talls grass and freedom as far as he could see with a glowing sunset, and promising him he wouldn’t go to anymore Offerings.

As much as he would like to be there, to stay in the shadows at the very least and guard from the dark corners where no one would dare to look when there was such a bright flame in front of them. Zoro won’t break his promise.

No one mentioned that he would have to attend the Offering before the Solstice anyway…

Zoro going to the Offering before the Solstice was never brought up because he was never going to be allowed to go. Because he has his *own*.

Heavens above and everything good, why does no one ever tell him about things until they’re happening? Zoro is certainly forgotten easily until it is time to bring him up stage. It is very clear that many of the officials and citizens of this kingdom really only care about *Nika*.

However, there are plenty that still hold Nika’s Luna in high regard.

Zoro can't help but compare the Offering held for him to the oddity that is Luffy's.

Here, at the top of a golden round dais, Zoro is made to hold a seiza. He is robed in all white, like Luffy had been, the same gauzy thin gossamer that leaves nothing to the imagination. Instead of the red painted lines, Zoro has bright, metallic gold paint that swirls around his wrists, his shoulders, the center of his chest.

The glint of the paint keeps the gold from blending into the tan of his skin, rich in color. It's almost like water shimmering off the bottom of pools of water. A smooth ripple of lines that mesh and refract the sun. That is all Zoro is, isn't he? A small dancing beam of Luffy's rays.

He can see the shine of it under his eyes where they have painted the soft gold on his face. He hadn't been able to see himself in a mirror as they painted him, but he felt the small circle at the center of his forehead, radiating in soft curves around his brows and coming to points under his eyes, where they had set single dots under each iris high on his cheek bones.

In seiza, Zoro can keep his hands covering himself subtly, but that also means the water cupped in his hands risks spilling if he makes too much movement. The priests had dipped his fingers and palms in melted wax, creating a seal for the gaps between knobby knuckles and scar-warn callouses from sword training. They had placed water into the bowl shape of his sealed hands and told him to not move.

The wax is only a single layer, thin, fragile, and Zoro knows just even a twitch of his fingers would break it, yet the wax feels as heavy as iron around his wrists.

It felt like he was seated there for hours, despite being able to watch the passage of shadows on the floor from the sun in the sky outside moving through the morning into afternoon.

He had been curious if this was just for show, or if he would ever see someone other than the priests or palace servants dolling him up. After they have perfected him, paint and wax and water and gold and sheer white, the final piece is the shimmering gold veil that they place over his head.

It's thin enough to see though, like it's almost nothing at all, and large enough that it covers him *entirely*. The servants that drape it over him only uncover his hands, artfully pleating the fabric around his wrists and knees so the uncovered part of him is framed in the dust-thin veil of gold all pretty and pleasing. Like he's carved from marble. A statue.

Zoro finds himself closing his eyes once there are no more hands or brushes that touch him. It's easy to slip into a meditative state when he's left alone. If he allows himself deeper into his mind, he can pretend that he is back in the shaded cool forest of green bamboo, calming his mind before a session with Kuina or group training with the other young boys focused on form and discipline.

Shimotsuki's voice a calm, clean cut through his mind. Just as clear as the rustle of bamboo leaves, preaching to him as his knees and ankles ached from *hours* spent in seiza on hardwood. Discomfort was only a barrier to inner peace and allowing his mind to—

"This is the new Alpha, hm?"

The hair on the back of Zoro's neck bristles immediately.

There is a deep voice in front of him and Zoro opens his eyes to the dark shadow of a man standing over him. *Towering* over him.

Zoro doesn't know how long he had slipped into that meditative state, but he realizes the room is now *full* of people. People and priests and guards all dressed in colors he doesn't recognize as Raftel fatigues and—

The round bellied man in front of him bends ever so slightly at the waist, a hand placed over his chest in a foreign gesture of respect. Zoro isn't sure if this is correct or if it should somehow be offensive that the man does not offer his hand in the gesture Zoro has seen many give to Luffy at Offerings.

The man's black beard is thick, covering the heavily ring-clad hand over his chest. When he smiles again, Zoro gets the full view of broken and missing teeth.

"My name is Teach. I am certain we will see more of each other in the days to come," the man, *Teach*, reaches for Zoro's cupped hands, and dips his fingertips in the water, bringing them back up to his lips, his forehead– ah, there it is.

Teach is a foreigner, but he obviously knows the customs of Raftel. Zoro finds himself confused, uneasy without understanding why. His alpha rumbles under his skin, and he struggles to keep his breath calm. Zoro glances around the room briefly, finds that he doesn't recognize *anyone* here, and somehow his chest feels tight.

"Your omega," Teach whispers to him, closer now that his breath flutters the veil over Zoro's face, "he is absolutely *radiant*. This year too, like all the rest. He is maturing *beautifully*."

The snarl in his throat rips free before Zoro can quiet it or tame himself. He *almost* moves, but there is a woman that practically manifests from around Zoro's shoulder and places a dainty, red manicured hand in front of Zoro. Cuts his eyeline of the burly large *oaf* that has the gall to lech over his omega to his fucking face.

"You are too close. Your time has passed, please continue on, Blackbeard."

Teach doesn't even try to stand his ground. He leans away as soon as the woman puts her hand out, leans away with that nasty grin never leaving his mouth. Zoro would very much like to see those crooked teeth tainted with his own blood after Zoro grinds his face into the stone stairs below him.

Just as soon as she appeared, that small hand is gone, and Zoro feels the woman step back from his side, behind him so quietly he doesn't know if she is still there or if she has left him alone entirely.

Not that he's too focused on her. Zoro watches the large back of the man as he proceeds to the back of the room. It's easy to keep an eye on him, he is the largest man here. As he approaches the door, three other men approach, closer, and Zoro gleans that they are together based on the familiarity that they have just from a distance.

Zoro makes sure to memorize every single one of their faces, his alpha pacing anxiously in his chest.

Zoro doesn't even notice the next handful of people that bow in front of him, each dipping their fingertips into the water he holds, offering gentle words, prayers, blessings, or just plain silence. None of the words reach his ears, too focused. Watching as Teach leaves through the wide open doors of the room.

Despite his nerves, nothing else really happens for the rest of the day.

Unexciting and mellow and Zoro finds himself slipping into his own mind again as the Lunar Offering continues well into Zoro's typical lunch time.

Teach stays in his thoughts despite his attempts to calm himself, to shift his thoughts to something more meditative or nicer to think about. Like if Luffy is also bored out of his skull sitting for an Offering. Or maybe he's used to it by now.

Zoro wishes he could see him. He wouldn't even need to talk, but he thinks, just being in the same room as Luffy at this point would help him settle.

Zoro doesn't pay attention to the people coming up to him, no one attempts to talk *to* him again. Children, women, men, nameless faces that blur together one after another.

So his guard stays down, relaxed, and Zoro allows himself to disconnect from it all, meditate, find a place in the middle distance to stare at and let his mind go. The warm incense smoke around him helps drown out everything too and Zoro forgets about the passage of time.

That is until the pressure on his shoulders turns sharp, jostling, and he blinks. Focuses again to find Sabo standing in front of him dressed intricately in orange and gold wraps, one hand lays over a damp towel that has soaked up the water from Zoro's hands and lays warm in his wax covered palms.

"Goodness. There you are. Don't tell me you're turning into Ace with this falling asleep wherever."

Zoro understands but… he still feels a little like he's stuck inside of his head. He blinks again, looks around to find the room is cleared empty aside from Sabo and three servants. The room is bathed in a bright orange glow from the sunset outside.

Sabo looks at him with wide eyes, then huffs a little, looking slightly embarrassed by Zoro's lack of reaction.

"Okay, bad joke, I'm working on those, I'm okay being the least funniest brother."

The blonde takes away the towel, held off to the side where a servant quickly takes it from him before replacing it with another cloth. It's much hotter than the last, as Sabo drapes it over Zoro's hands.

"You can move again, by the way. This will help you get most of the wax off your hands. We have one more little ceremony to get through before we can let you go," Sabo explains as he gently presses the cloth against Zoro's knuckles, his palms, making the thin layer of wax crackle underneath.

Zoro finds that his legs are entirely asleep when he tries to adjust himself out of his seiza. Heavy as stone, he moves to seat himself on the dais with his feet on the floor, wincing at the twinge in his shoulders, low in his neck, and the prickling needles that begin to wake up in his feet.

“Luffy is eager to see you,” Sabo whispers, just between the two of them as he unveils Zoro. He offers Zoro a smile when Zoro looks at his face again. His eyes must do enough in giving him away before he can gather his words. Sabo looks like he wants to tease him.

Zoro wants to see Luffy too. Has spent all day yearning for him. Couldn’t even be flustered with himself over how weary he is just from spending a few hours away from the omega. He’d like to blame it on Luffy being his mate, instincts, the preheat making his alpha more obsessive.

“He certainly had a more exciting day than you did. But nothing is ever really calm when Luffy’s involved. You seem to be making that worse,” Sabo takes the cloth away and Zoro flexes his stiff fingers as Sabo continues, “Not that it’s a bad thing. The Elders just think you’re a bad influence without realizing this is just how Luffy is normally.”

Zoro rises when Sabo stands and offers a hand out for him. He squeezes at his palm for a moment, stern, but Zoro knows he’s just making sure Zoro is paying attention.

“Thank you, really. For helping Luffy be a little brighter. I see it, Ace sees it. I know you don’t know much about Luffy’s previous alphas, but they always eclipsed him, tried quieting him. I can’t remember the last time Luffy got to be so carefree around his Alpha.”

Sabo’s sincerity had such a weight to it Zoro felt flustered and scared all at the same time. Zoro knew that Luffy’s brothers were loyal, but he didn’t realize how intense they could be, how deep that blood ran.

Zoro didn’t have much time to dwell on it, Sabo didn’t let him fumble his way through an awkward attempt at reassurance or gratitude or… what else.

Instead, Sabo and the small handful of servants had escorted Zoro further into the palace, into the temple, the large courtroom Zoro had been brought into on his first day.

There are two tables in the middle of the room, the oculus in the ceiling casting a near perfect glowing orange circle over top of them. Zoro just has enough time to ogle at the piles of fruit and nuts and frankly concerning number of what looks to be whole quail piled on a plate— Likely for Luffy entirely— before he must stand at alert.

“ZORO!!”

Booms across the courtroom, surrounding, full, a burst of sunlight and gold, the clattering of dishes and clay cups and bowls and women gasping and exclaiming in shock at the scatter of flowers and powders and things when Luffy launches himself from his seat.

The omega comes barrelling across the marble floors, barefoot, and launches himself into Zoro’s chest.

There’s a lot all at once that hits Zoro *aside* from Luffy’s entire bodyweight, making him stumble back, arms clasping him around the waist tightly.

The headache Zoro didn't even know that was quietly stabbing him behind the ears, deep in his skull, washes away immediately when he tucks his nose into Luffy's nape and breathes in him, able to pick out the clean scent of his omega from the cloud of incense and burning candles. Doesn't realize the rattling in his chest is a relieved growl on a rather deep sigh from his own chest.

Someone behind them yelps "Nika-sama!! You're not *dry*," Like someone has personally stabbed her through the chest with a spear.

That's when Zoro feels the scratchy, tacky feeling of Luffy's hands on the back of his neck, grabbing at him until they bury in the scruff of his green hair and *pull*. Ah, Zoro's hair has grown longer hasn't it? Messy at his ears, just enough for his omega to grab and yank his face up.

Whatever is on Luffy's hands, it's getting caked in Zoro's hair, and he can't find a single shred of reasonable concern over that, finding himself staring up at Luffy's beaming wide smile and *breathless* giggles.

Dear heavens above and the Earth beneath his feet, the Sun is *beautiful.*

Luffy swoops in for a kiss, and Zoro tries to lean into him to allow himself to be swept up in it, the audience that Zoro doesn't notice anymore be damned, but frantically, swiftly, there are *two* hands between their mouths.

"*Jeez*, okay, enough you stinkin' lovebirds, save it for *later*," Ace's voice hisses from the side.

Ace, who is behind Luffy, hand practically covering Luffy's entire bottom half of his face where he's clamped his mouth and using that to bodily peel Luffy off. Zoro blinks, feels the moment struck from his mind and realizes Sabo's stiff hand still in the air between Luffy and Zoro's faces.

Zoro feels his ears growing warm, when he notices how *red* Sabo's face is, and the room full of servants and guards along the walls are all *staring*. Though when they notice that Zoro is looking around, they all shuffle in an awkward mix of looking at the ground or turning around entirely.

"You've caused *enough* trouble today, you little *brat*," Ace hisses at Luffy, quiet enough that only they can hear. Zoro remembers Sabo's comment from earlier too, and curiosity pokes him in the sides. What did Luffy possibly get up to today? During an Offering no less.

"Noo, Zoro," Luffy whines in his direction, as Ace drags him back to the group of women seated on the floor who have righted most of the knocked over bowls and such. They waste no time fussing over the omega when he's back in their grasp.

Zoro feels a pull in his muscles, can't help but follow along at Luffy's insistent puppy eyes that he's shooting him from over there. Alpha bending to the call of his Omega.

A servant approaches him when he gets within reach and she offers Zoro a damp cloth with a pink face, "before it stains," she almost whispers.

Zoro takes it, confused as he rubs it over the stickiness on his neck and as best as he can through his hair. It comes away stained a faint ruddish brown. He realizes that it's the paste that is now being reapplied to Luffy's hands and wrists and feet in simple swirls and lines.

"Hold *still*," Ace grumbles, a hand fisted in the top of Luffy's hair and twisting, forcing Luffy's face forward, "don't fuck up your mehndi again or *I'll* be the one to reapply it."

“The Elders wouldn’t let me be *seen* at the Solstice if *you* did it,” Luffy hisses, tongue stuck out, but ultimately keeps his arms and hands still as two women each hover over his skin with paper wrapped cones, intent and focused and hardly listening to the bickering over their heads.

“And *you’re* over here,” Sabo’s voice pops up next to Zoro, an arm hooked into his, and he’s pulled to the tables filled with flower arrangements and clay bowls of various powders in reds and oranges and yellows.

Sabo leaves Zoro to look at the things on the table, glancing at the food here and there as his stomach reminds him he hasn’t had even a single drop of water since very early this morning. He’s actually kind of impressed that Luffy hasn't torn the entire feast to shards of plates and gnawed clean bones.

Unless they’ve allowed him to eat something today. Zoro hopes they let him have *something*, Luffy’s appetite is…

A wet finger sweeps down his neck and Zoro flinches. He whirls around, seeing the blonde with his fingers dripping in bright yellow.

“May the Sun warm your face and Its light enveil your soul,” Sabo says.

“Ah! Sabo started it!” Luffy cries, and once again, there’s a rushed, frenzied series of cries from the women around him as he squirms out of their grasp to try and stand. He doesn’t make it very far, as Ace takes him by the shoulders and firmly plants his butt back onto the sitting pillow.

“You’ll get your turn. Be *patient*.”

Ace leaves Luffy’s side to come over to the tables, Zoro watches him reach over and dip his fingers into a bowl of yellow liquid. Ace takes his fingers, dripping, and swipes them across Zoro’s forehead. Ace’s words are softer, quieter, like a secret between them, a promise rather than a prayer.

“May the Sun warm your face and Its light enveil your soul.”

“*Urghhhh*, no *fair*! You two never go first!” Luffy won’t let them have a single moment alone. And only Zoro is privy to the fond roll of Ace’s eyes before he and Sabo share a *look*.

“Haven’t ever *liked* any of your Alphas before,” Sabo pipes up, wandering over to Luffy and ruffling his hair up, getting the remaining yellow into the dark locks.

“I haven’t even done much,” Zoro chimes in, finally remembering how to unstick his tongue from the top of his mouth.

Ace roughly shoves an elbow into his ribs.

“So *you* think. Promise, this whole damned palace is different because of you.”

Luffy is oddly silent while Sabo keeps playing with his hair, akin to petting him, ruffling the strands into wild cowlicks before smoothing them back over, a small smile on his face the whole time.

The room grows still as Zoro finds Luffy’s eyes. Staring.

Luffy is the one with a multitude of hands on him, keeping him to the floor, but Zoro is the only one that feels like he is completely chained in place by the weight of those dark eyes. The gold around his throat has a heavy warmth to it that can't be ignored, like it's reacting to Luffy's steady gaze.

"Mm. Zoro is *very good*."

Luffy lifts a patterned hand, palm open, beckoning, a glimmer in his eyes.

"Sit with me until I'm done?" A command hidden in a question. Zoro doesn't even hesitate.

He's sure Sabo brought him here for more than just being a glorified lapdog, but his place is here, seated at Luffy's hip, fighting a croon in his chest as Luffy warmly leans into his chest, nuzzles at his chin before holding still again with his hands held aloft in front of himself.

Zoro doesn't need words to feel Luffy's praise under his skin, the soft change of his scent becoming more mellow, sweeter, a balm on Zoro's mind that he could honestly fall asleep to right here.

Very good, Luffy had said.

Good Alpha.

After Luffy's mehndi had been finished and Zoro had been thoroughly smeared with yellow in his hair, on his chest, on his face, mostly from Luffy (who had simply grabbed the entire bowl of liquid and splashed it onto Zoro so to not ruin the designs on his fingers and palms), the two of them had been allowed to eat their fill as the glow of sunset disappeared.

Luffy, predictably, and yet still impressively, cleared the entire pile of quail and the three full loaves of bread, as well as the bowls of nuts and dried apricots. Zoro happily fought for his fill of meat and full plates, at one point taking the biggest bite he could out of the hunk of ribs still in Luffy's hand.

Of course this resulted in Luffy's offended gasp and practically climbing into Zoro's lap, trying to pry his mouth open. Zoro couldn't help the full bellied laugh when he had asked if Luffy was going to eat the chewed mouthful right out of his stomach to which Luffied resolutely and *loudly* said that he would, looking like he was calculating how to fit into Zoro's throat.

They were left alone after being led back to the baths, bellies full. Zoro was ready for a hot soak and then to collapse into bed, despite having done nothing but sit all day long.

For all of Luffy's eagerness to have Zoro all to himself, as soon as the doors to the baths are closed, leaving them properly alone, Luffy darts off immediately. Zoro stays behind, pulling the turmeric stained linens and clothes from his body, watching with an amused eye while Luffy's own clothes get scattered along the tile and marble.

There is a distant, "*yahoo*!" and a following splash that makes Zoro hurry. Just slightly concerned for Luffy slipping and busting his head or drowning.

Zoro is met with the sight of Luffy stretched out on his back on the far end of the pool, floating, surrounded by heavy trails of steam. The room is well lit with the plethora of candles, lined along the walls and set in the windows, a few even strewn on the floor on the wet tiles rimming the pool.

There are small bowls set around, gently burning frankincense, vials scattered at seemingly random– of soaps or oils Zoro presumes. The smoke and steam curls out of the open windows, making the dark star-filled sky outside seem to glitter.

The oculus above the pool is just as dark and star-filled, casting a soft moonlight in against the water. The glimmer of starlight scatters on the water's surface as Zoro wades in, focused on Luffy who remains floating at the far end, head back and eyes closed, a small smile on his lips.

Zoro remembers his hesitance the last time he and Luffy were here together, so many worries and emotions troubling him. There is no hesitance now as he reaches out and touches the tan, smooth thigh just under the surface of the water and traces it up to a small hip.

He certainly doesn't smile when he notices Luffy flinch at the bold contact, eyes slipping open.

"Trouble everywhere you go, huh? What did you get up to today? I can't imagine you get up to your usual mischief during Offerings."

Luffy scoffs, a grumpy scowl twisting his face before he turns his head away, pointedly staring out a window on the wall. No jokes then.

"I didn't do anything to cause trouble."

"Not what I heard."

"Zoro's deaf as fu-"

"Oi," he pinches the wet skin at Luffy's hip, snickering when the omega yips at him and snatches him at the wrist.

"If those dumb old men kept their mouths *shut* then I wouldn't have had to say anything," Luffy hisses.

Ah, so he *did* do something.

"The priests?"

"No. Different old geezers," Luffy simpers, and Zoro charmingly can hear Ace in that tone, obviously they grew up together, "*Gorosei*. From an outside kingdom, stupid, dusty."

Zoro blinks. Outsiders.

"I thought Raftel was locked down from allowing anyone to enter?"

Luffy lets out a sigh, using the grip he has on Zoro's wrist to tug, bring him closer so he can stand, water splashing as he drapes his arms around Zoro's shoulders, nuzzling at Zoro's collarbones in greeting before he starts to cup water over Zoro, washing away the yellow in his hair and skin.

"During the Solstice other Royals are allowed *very* restricted access. Only today and tomorrow. They are kicked out for the rest of the Solstice. Regular people can't come or go like that. It lets the

stupid priests see who their possible allies are, or something. They take note of the kingdoms that don't come to worship Nika."

"Seems troublesome to make such a long journey only to stay for a day or two," Zoro lets his wet hands come up from the water, smoothing back the dark curls framing Luffy's face, pushing his bangs off his forehead, thumb catching the stray droplets of water from Luffy's brow.

"Not my problem," Luffy grumbles, seemingly slighted, his hands stop, now that Zoro is cleaned off.

"But there *is* a problem? What happened today? The uh, Gorosei?"

It takes a moment before Luffy responds again, Zoro is almost sure that it's a sore subject, with how Luffy doesn't make any movement or any sort of indication that he'll elaborate. Until he sighs again, leaning into Zoro's gentle petting, an idle little tip of his head.

"Stupid old farts were talking about Ace and Sabo. That they shouldn't be so close to me and other *stupid* things, so I told them to shut their mouths and to get out of the palace." Luffy's scent turns bitter, and Zoro rubs at the top of Luffy's wet head with his cheek.

"Man, I'm missing out on all the excitement, huh?"

He could only imagine. Luffy has proven to be likely someone to act first and talk later, Zoro has no doubts that if truly slighted the omega would lash out with more than just a sharp tongue.

"Dumb priests were there too. Got angry that I moved, supposed to be like a statue during the offerings. Said it was because of my heat coming," Luffy suddenly looks up, chin digging into Zoro's chest. His grey eyes narrow, and Zoro pointedly pokes the deep furrow between his eyebrows and tries to rub the stress away while Luffy talks.

"I would have done the same thing even if I *wasn't* about to have my heat. No one talks crap about my brothers."

Zoro hums, showing his agreement as he lets his pheromones looser in the room, hopes Luffy is too close to *not* feel relaxed by them. For good measure though, he brushes the one hand at Luffy's waist up along his spine until he can cup the back of his neck, a thumb pushing onto Luffy's scent gland under his nape. He can see that the skin over it has gone flushed red and swollen, ready to be bitten, preparing for Luffy's heat in full swing…

"I'm not scared to fight an old man," Luffy continues, heat in his tone, but his voice is losing the anger behind it as Zoro keeps touching, keeps smothering him in pheromones.

"You'd beat 'em up too quick. Not worth your time when it's just senile old words. Probably don't know what they're saying, old age makes your brain mush."

"I *would*. I could kill them. Anyone. No one gets to talk about Sabo or Ace or *you*." Luffy snarls now, water splashing around their waists when he jerks back.

Zoro reaches, both hands, snatching Luffy at the waist and yanking him back in. The quiet lap of the water on the tiles at the edges of the pool echoes.

“Oh *really*? Gonna have to beat yourself up, you called me stupid the other day,” Zoro teases, hiding a smile against Luffy’s cheek.

“Liar! I didn’t say it out loud–!” Luffy cuts himself off, but the admission has already been sung. Luffy squirms against Zoro’s hands, grumbling against the quiet laughter Zoro keeps kissing into warm damp skin.

“Well, *I* can say it! You’re *mine*. Can talk to you however I want!”

“I’m still your *Alpha*,” Zoro presses, voice stern, but he doesn’t feel any genuine offense at Luffy talking about him like this. Like he’s some obedient dog rather than a mate. Zoro had long already known his heart bent to Luffy’s every whim and silly demand.

Luffy’s hand suddenly strikes out, viper quick as he shoves Zoro away from him, the warm steam from the baths still feel cold when Luffy’s body isn’t against his anymore. But Luffy is grabbing him by the collar, tugging him down until he has to lift his eyes to meet Luffy’s face.

“*My alpha*. Mine.”

Zoro meant it as a position of higher status to get one over on Luffy, but Luffy speaks of it like a *possession*. Zoro is his. His. His.

Zoro can’t kneel here without the water going over his head, but there’s an ache in his gut that demands it from him. Luffy, perfect, lovely, divine omega, seems to know before Zoro’s empty brain can rattle around to make the words form properly so he can beg.

Luffy trails backward slowly, keeps Zoro hooked at the collar and makes him follow until Luffy has seated himself up on the tiled edge of the far wall of the pool, bright green wall of plants behind him, the soft trickle of the fountain, and Zoro between his spread legs.

He’s hard.

Zoro notices Luffy first, smooth tan skin over confident shoulders, shadows of his ribs, thin waist, the cut of his hips, Luffy’s cock hard against his own thigh. The water from the bath leaves Luffy glowing, has Zoro’s tongue drydrydry– aching for just a taste.

There’s a droplet of water just over Luffy’s chest, trailing down until it gets caught on a tan nipple. Zoro leans in, tiles under his knees aching, aching in between his legs, and only realizes that *he’s* also hard once he’s lapping away the warm little droplet, soft bud dragging over the flat of his tongue.

Zoro groans around the nothing taste of water, clean skin, nothing but texture for his mouth to follow, hot tongue and wet lips as he latches on and *bites*. Luffy gasps, and the tug on the gold around Zoro’s throat turns into a sharp pull of his hair.

Growling, he doesn’t let go even when Luffy’s breath turns into a whine.

“Z-Zoro you– can’t leave marks,” Luffy hiccups, legs shifting, but he’s not making any real attempt at getting away. By some grace of Nika or the Heavens, Zoro remembers that they have the festival tomorrow.

Luffy's scent is a heavy fog in his mind though and his reasoning is turning to slip rather than remaining a solid foundation. Sweet, sweet, sweet. Pretty omega that tastes good, smells good, feels good against him, in his mouth, in his head—

Zoro feels himself *purring* when Luffy's hands cup his face, pull him up away from his chest, capture his mouth instead. Sharp little fangs in his bottom lip that makes Zoro whine. His hand slips on the tile by Luffy's hip where he tries to keep himself upright, and they both go toppling back into the plants.

"Want Zoro," his omega whispers. Confesses, as his stained fingers tease Zoro's mouth, an almost small reverent touch of his wet fingertips.

The heavy pad of foliage under him doesn't seem to bother Luffy much, there's not a lot of room on the decorative ledge, their feet are still in the water, but the lack of proper laying space doesn't phase either of them.

"You said it before. I'm already yours."

"*No*. Want *you*."

The world spins, a splash of water, a rough rustle of leaves and the bite of warm tiled edges digging into Zoro's skin as he's shoved onto his back.

Luffy is thin between Zoro's thighs, warm and pressing and magnetic. His grey eyes are dark and roaming, and Zoro feels them like a hot hand even as Luffy's own trace over him. Groping at Zoro's chest, petting down his belly feather light and making him tense.

Luffy's had his hands on him before, he won't ever forget the first time he'd been made to cum in Luffy's hands, surrounded by tall grass and the rustle of wind and bugs and freedom of being entirely alone with his omega.

This doesn't seem too far off, the smell of green around him, clean dirt, frankincense and hyacinths and the trickle of hot water that only playfully echoes along with the sound of their gasps and breaths.

Zoro's hard in Luffy's warm grip, and feels his eyes roll at the first lethal slick drag up to the tip of himself before Luffy's thumb plays at the slit.

"*Good*," Luffy purrs at him, under his breath, and Zoro feels the steam of the bath filling his skull watching Luffy bend his head and spit directly on his cock, smearing it with his lithe fingers, "Good Boy, Zoro."

Fuck the Solstice. Fuck Waiting. Fuck the Elders. Fuck Raftel. Fuck *Nika*.

Zoro groans, torn between reaching for Luffy and keeping his hands out of the way, and he settles for putting both hands over his face, pushing like he can stop the heat blooming over his skin, can stop it from melting his brain.

Luffy's wrist twists, fingers slipping, squeezing, *slckslckslck*, as he pulls Zoro's cock faster, and any prayer he could have offered in desperation and plea goes melting out of his ears. His moan feels too quiet and too loud at the same time, but Luffy just purrs at him, leans over him more like he could taste the vibrations of his name in the air between them.

"*Luffy–*"

"Mmh, being so good. Pretty alpha. All *mine*. Want you to cum. Want it to be because of me. *For* me."

"*Yes*," Zoro gasps, and his body is nothing but melt and hot and slick and the throb of his knot as Luffy's one hand slips down and squeezes around it.

It's like falling, dropping out of the sky with the sun burning him from climbing too high, and the mist of clouds around him aren't even able to comfort him as he plummets. Luffy's mouth is on his when he moans again, feels his muscles tensing all at once before snapping in release, twitching.

His fingers shake, too much or just from the exertion of holding back, he doesn't know. Can't think. Only knows Luffy, Luffy, Luffy, warm and wet and in his mouth, on his tongue, moaning with him as Zoro's cum stripes his own belly that trembles with the force of his orgasm.

His chest is heaving, pulling for air that won't come fast enough, stealing life right from Luffy's offering lungs, burning and wet and—

Pressure between his legs, lower, under his balls.

It's not as much of a surprise this time around. Luffy tried it before, when they first met here in this very bath. Zoro had been more startled at how forward the omega had been rather than the concept of letting an omega fuck him.

It's not even something to consider now, if Luffy wants this, Zoro will give it, spread his legs apart wider and swallow the sweet moan Luffy drops into his throat when he presses a finger against his entrance.

The kiss breaks with a wet noise, leaving Zoro dazed and heavy in the squashed mess of plants under his head, focusing on the fuzzy glowing halo of Luffy above him, grey eyes dark but wide.

“Can I?” He breathes, like he can’t believe it, even though he already has one finger all the way inside, slick with Zoro’s own release. It should be *humiliating*, for an Alpha to be treated this way. Abase himself for an omega, to be bitched—

This is nothing like that. Even his alpha under his skin doesn’t find Luffy’s touch and prodding and insistence to be a threat. Zoro can’t think about what that could even possibly mean, or what that would make Zoro in the face of anyone that would learn about his next actions.

A little voice whispers that Zoro can’t mate Luffy before the Solstice, but no one said *anything* about Luffy taking Zoro instead.

Buzzing with the high of his climax still, Zoro presses his fingers under Luffy’s chin, pecks his full mouth and runs his thumb over the little scar under Luffy’s eye, gets lost in the full black lashes batting at him, the way Luffy’s pupils grow wider before he closes them and turns to nuzzle Zoro’s palm, kissing just under the heel of his thumb, nipping him with sharp canines.

“Zoro’s okay?” He mumbles again, right into Zoro’s palm, questioning his very bones. Zoro feels the vibration of his voice up his arm.

“Mm. Want you,” Zoro taunts— grins as he clenches around Luffy’s finger, brain glittering with *goodgoodgood* when Luffy’s scent gets saccharine and heavy.

Luffy *growls* at him. Honest-to-god deep in his chest, and *that* spikes his alpha of all things. It takes everything in him to stay on his back, to not react other than smiling in Luffy’s face as he scrambles for a bowl to the side, cursing and spitting and whining when he knocks it into the water.

There’s the sharp, quick *fzzz* of the frankincense sadly being put out before it sinks while the other little glass bottles stay afloat. Luffy’s finger slips out of Zoro as he goes chasing after the bottles floating away faster than should be fair. Maybe if the idiot stopped splashing around so much…

Luffy yips, and Zoro gets the *joy* of watching Luffy somehow slip and go under the water in a dramatic splash before emerging sputtering and clinging tight to a brown vial. Water slings off Luffy’s dripping curls when he whirls to seethe at Zoro with a small hiss.

“Don’t laugh,” he pouts, a useless demand as Zoro feels the laughter bubbling from his chest, infectious, fond, warm.

“You gonna stop me, water boy?”

“I’m going to *fuck* you,” Luffy snarls and splashes his way over. Zoro feels a swoop in his gut, nervous excitement as Luffy slips back in between Zoro’s legs and dumps the entirety of the bottle into his lap.

The scent of olive oil is strong between them and Luffy’s fingers are clumsy, messy, skittering as they smear the oil through the green curls under Zoro’s bellybutton, the base of his cock, under his balls until he’s pressing in with two fingers this time.

Zoro squashes a hiss and a groan in his own mouth, bites his tongue at the stretch and frankly very weird sensation of Luffy entering him so quickly. The oil helps, it doesn’t *hurt*, but Luffy pauses anyway.

“Oops,” he mumbles to himself as he leans over Zoro’s chest, leaves his two fingers knuckle deep as he gets into Zoro’s face, “Too fast? It’s okay? Hurts?”

“Don’t gotta ask. It’s fine, doesn’t hurt at all, swear.”

“Mmmh. Gotta ask. Zoro won’t wanna do this again if I’m bad at it.”

Zoro huffs, fond, and hooks an arm around Luffy’s back.

“I’ll let you, again. Any time you want. Just... Go slow… Haven’t done this before…” Zoro trails off, quiet into a whisper that dies in his chest as his ears go hot.

He’s not used to allowing himself to be so vulnerable, but it’s so achingly easy when it’s for Luffy. He just hopes the omega understands, knows that Zoro isn’t just talking to be brave or anything.

Luffy eyes him, searching his face, quiet and still for a few seconds, only bending to kiss Zoro again when enough time has passed that Zoro feels the need to squirm. Luffy’s lips are a good distraction, something to lick and bite and suck on when two fingers twist and press into his hole.

Forgetting that he can breathe from his nose, Zoro has to drop his head back with a gasp when Luffy gently slicks a third finger into him with a content, pleased hum.

He can feel his cock twitch in a pathetic, half hard attempt of pleasure as Luffy’s knuckles bump across something inside of himself that makes Zoro suck in another breath.

“Zoro’s good. Doing so good. Taking it so well,” Luffy keeps rambling at him when his mouth isn’t occupied. A steady drone of praise and purrs and soft noises, busy lips wetsoft on Zoro’s cheek, along his jaw, the side of his neck.

Zoro’s nails dig in, clawing, trying to stay grounded along Luffy’s back when those three fingers spread apart wide, stretching, sticky slick and gliding and curling— Fuck, *fuck*–!

Like he’s somehow taken a peek inside of Zoro’s mind, Luffy’s other hand wiggles between them, soft, easy, taking Zoro’s wet cock and dragging along the underside until he holds Zoro’s half-swollen knot firmly. Squeezes him *hard* and makes Zoro’s back arch.

“Luffy I’m–!”

Cumming? Gods it feels like he could, teetering on a dangerous edge, yet firmly rooted in place no matter how much he’s nudged and nudged and nudged.

Luffy’s tongue is wet hot as it drags up the front of Zoro’s throat, an open mouthed kiss under his chin, teeth against his jaw, tugging on his earlobe, a tittering little clinkclink of gold earrings on Luffy’s canines.

There’s a tremor in Zoro’s thighs, feels it like a cramp all the way to his lower back, torn between needing to squirm away or buck up into the pleasure. His knot is still squeezed tight and safe in Luffy’s fist, occasionally popping from the ring of strong fingers to the base and making Zoro forget *everything* in his brain. Those three fingers stay deep inside of him, no longer thrusting or twisting, just a steady, numbing rock of Luffy’s arm, curls of his fingertips.

Zoro’s head thrashes, another wretched moan clawing up from his throat as sparks dance up his spine. Luffy knows just where to push, how to time it just right with milking his knot to drive him

wild.

He doesn't realize that he's clawing up Luffy's back again, pink welts all the way up Luffy's spine and over his shoulder, messy in soaking wet curls while Luffy toys with the gold in Zoro's ears with his mouth.

"*Please*," he heaves, ribs too small for his own body, whines at his omega for mercy with the breath he doesn't have, "*Please*."

Luffy groans softly against Zoro's ear, trails messy kisses through his hairline to his temple, blindly against one eye, Zoro's nose, his mouth, licks behind his teeth as he drags his fingers out and leaves Zoro achingly empty.

Not for long, though.

What a merciful idol he is, the grandness of the Sun itself, and Luffy grants him *yes* rather than ignoring him.

His cock is certainly smaller than Zoro's, but compared to the three fingers, Zoro is truly stuffed. It's just the tip and still, Zoro finds himself panting, breathing against the clench of his muscles to stay relaxed.

"Okay?" Luffy's voice slurs against his tongue, in Zoro's mouth, wet and muffled and Zoro kisses the question straight from his mouth.

"Okay," he hears himself agreeing quietly, knees knocking Luffy's sides, thighs pressing, trying to encourage the omega deeper.

He is pleasantly surprised at how much it doesn't hurt at all, maybe that's the rush of endorphins where Luffy's still locked on his knot, or the sheer ridiculous amount of olive oil, or that this is truly where Zoro's place in life is.

Luffy keeps rocking, a gently in, in, in of his hips carefully, slowly, kissing Zoro's breath away until their hips finally meet with a soft *plap*. Luffy suddenly pulls from the kiss, dropping into Zoro's chest, thin but strong arms around Zoro's waist and hugging him. Moaning.

Chest to chest, he can feel the rabbit-fast thundering of Luffy's heartbeat behind his sternum, pressed right against Zoro's own racing heartbeat. He wants Luffy's mouth though, and he's not anywhere close for Zoro to steal a kiss.

He nuzzles the top of Luffy's head, wet curls, warm water, hyacinths and sunshine. He noses in there, whines at Luffy and hopes the noise is enough to get his head up. And when it *is*, Zoro pulls Luffy in at the shoulders and bites his bottom lip until he tastes iron.

"Can talk me in circles about being yours, but you haven't shown me. *Make me yours*. Wanna feel it," he growls, feeling his knot throbbing in Luffy's hand as a drooling drip of cum leaks onto his belly again.

Luffy's hand releasing him should *hurt*, the sudden loss of pressure around his cock should send his alpha into a panic, but he doesn't have time to register the ache.

Luffy's hips slam into him so hard Zoro's head knocks into the tiled wall behind him and the leaves rustle as his shoulders bounce. Luffy's hands are strong, bruising, taking him by the hips and dragging him back, pulling him into the next thrust, the next, the next, another.

Fuck.

Fuck.

Zoro's moan bounces off the walls, and Luffy doesn't even try to quiet him as he fucks him hard. Certainly they've alerted someone by now, the slosh of water, Luffy's grunts, Zoro's moans, the slap of skin, *loud*.

Hell, the entire godsdamned palace could stand audience in the baths right this very instant and Zoro would have no idea. He can only feel Luffy, see the omega between his thighs drilling him closer to another orgasm right on the heels of his first, preheat filling his nose and senses until Zoro is nothing but putty.

Sensitive but so good— *so good*, Luffy groans, breathless, water dripping off his skin. Zoro wants it inside of himself. Wants to pull Luffy against his chest and take him, an ache in his gums to bite and claim and squeeze Luffy into his ribs until they've melded into one.

Until no one could even tell them apart.

Luffy's moaning again, hips dragging out shorter each time, thrusts growing shallower but never losing any of the force behind them. His fingers slick across Zoro's hips, slippery from the water and oil and the more he tries to pull, the more Zoro slips, the more Luffy's starting to claw at him, digging in until he's breaking skin.

Zoro's alpha rumbles, but it's not like he can do anything. Helpless and right where he wants to be, legs held open and Luffy's cock so deep Zoro swears that his stomach will be bruised come tomorrow morning.

Luffy moves again, frantic, voice pitched into a moan as he hooks an arm under one of Zoro's legs to spread him open more, rocking his hips in until he's *deep* again and staying there. Zoro is just with it enough to hear Luffy *whining* his name, eyes fluttering as his head dips, "Zoro, Zoro, *Zoro*."

He can feel Luffy cum more than he hears him, the strong pulse of his cock as he releases inside in hot gushes. It's thin, Zoro doesn't feel much other than Luffy's twitching, but he enjoys it all the same, as his omega chases after his pleasure inside of him.

Zoro rocks his hips, a slight buck up, just to feel the stretch of his hole around Luffy as he reaches down to take his own knot and squeeze. It's only slightly mortifying at how quick he cums at that, seeing Luffy's eyes slightly opened to see what the movement was about, and watching the ever-faint glow of omega-gold when Zoro shoots white over his own wrist.

It's not explosive like his first orgasm, more like a steady crash of waves, over and over and over until Zoro's shaking and out of breath.

Luffy drops into him with a heaving sigh when he's done. Zoro grunts at the sudden weight right on his chest, but welcomes the omega's skin warm along every last inch of himself. Luffy snuggles against him, makes no comment at Zoro's cum smearing between them.

“Good Alpha,” Luffy slurs, a giggle under his breath as he kisses the still fluttering pulse on the side of Zoro’s neck. He feels it in his fucking *bones*, thank you. He *is* a good alpha. He’s Luffy’s good alpha.

“Zoro’s purring,” Luffy feels the need to comment, like Zoro can’t fucking taste it in his throat from how strong it’s rattling.

“Shishishi, You liked it? Weird Alpha. What if I wanna fuck you all the time?” Luffy hedges, like he’s testing, threatening. Like he’s expecting Zoro to tell him that that wasn’t the best orgasm he’s ever had.

Still feeling like there’s no sensible or intelligible words in his head, Zoro grunts his agreement.

“Huh? *Kay*?” Luffy appears from where he’d been suckling little hickies on Zoro’s throat. Those glittering eyes on him are grey again but still so bright.

Zoro pets across Luffy’s back, touching just to touch, enjoys the soft skin, warmth, the plush give of Luffy’s ass when he takes both hands to squeeze.

“If y’wanna,” he rumbles, content at watching Luffy’s face turn all pink red when Zoro’s fingers tease *in*. Damn Luffy is fucking *slick*, the breathtaking, amazing omega he is. Of course he fucked Zoro’s brains out while slicking his own thighs drenched.

If thinking about another orgasm didn’t make him want to sink to the bottom of the bath, he’d certainly suggest another round, but as it stands, Zoro feels the exhaustion of a long day and his first time making his muscles loose and weak.

“*You* liked that a lot.” Zoro comments as he teases the slickwet entrance, fingertips already soaked just from some idle petting.

“Zoro was my first time,” Luffy whispers at him, like it’s some earth-shattering secret.

Zoro feels his head tip in confusion. Luffy has had countless alphas before him, every heat spent with a knot.

“Stupid, Alpha,” Luffy giggles, like he was expecting Zoro’s reaction, “No one’s let me fuck them before.”

“Could’a fooled me, knew exactly how to fuck an alpha.”

“Zoro took it easily. Liar. I’m not the only one experienced.”

“Swear. Never fucked anyone before you, Luffy.” Zoro catches the way Luffy eyes him, doubt, pouting, and then his features softening.

“Ah! That– Oh. Aw, Zoro’s first time should’ve been in bed.”

“Doesn’t matter that much. Where.”

Only thing that matters is that it was Luffy.

He moves to sit up out of the poor bed of plants and feels a little guilty when they don’t bounce back to their full foliage. There’s a very obviously Zoro sized stamp in the greenery.

The slight change in position has Luffy naturally leaning back to give Zoro room and when his cock slips out finally, Zoro aches at the odd feeling of emptiness and the ghost of the omega's cock stretching him open still. Fuck, what does he do if this becomes an addiction?

Zoro steps towards Luffy, wanting to be closer again, comforted, and feels confused when Luffy steps back. Avoiding him.

Zoro steps in again and Luffy takes a larger step back, wades in till the water is at his chest, and a grin crosses his mouth.

Huffing, Zoro feels his alpha growling, hears the rumble of it bouncing off the tiles, *chases*, and takes another step closer, determined. Luffy bursts into a giggle before he shuffles backwards two steps, easily dodges the sweeping bear arm Zoro uses to try and snatch him.

"Why are you running from me?" He grumbles, feeling slighted. Why doesn't his omega want to be held?

Luffy blows bubbles from where he's crouched in the bath, water over his nose, eyes squinted in an obvious smile.

Zoro lunges for him, feeling ridiculous as he jumps in the water. Playing. When was the last time he really did after he learned to hold a sword?

Luffy ducks under the water and appears behind Zoro with a splash.

"What? A big horny alpha keeps following after me, why wouldn't I run?" Luffy teases, snickering as Zoro spins around and leaps for him again.

The pool is sploshing at the edges, sending the hot water overflowing at the constant waves of movement, too much excitement for a bathhouse, but honestly, when has anything been proper with Luffy?

"You shouldn't run from your *mate*," Zoro points out. Big horny alpha. Who?

Luffy picks his head up, looks around the bathroom dramatically, and then drops his shoulders.

"Mate? Where? I don't have a mate, yet."

The water splashes again, as Zoro keeps after Luffy, cat and mouse, until finally Zoro catches Luffy at the wrist, yanks hard enough to send Luffy right into his chest.

"Can't call me *yours* if I'm not your mate."

Luffy clicks his tongue, seems to not try and wiggle free, and reaches up to hook two fingers in Zoro's gold collar.

"This makes you *mine*."

Zoro bares his teeth in Luffy's face, nips at a full, grinning cheek, and rumbles at the giggle Luffy lets out.

"Then I get to–" He leans in, naturally takes advantage of Luffy's laughter and the way he throws his head back to go for his nape—

Luffy gasps, and Zoro's fangs scrape the back of Luffy's knuckles as they cover his scent gland just in time. Zoro's fingers dig bruises into Luffy's hip.

"*Fuck the Elders*," Zoro growls, laves his tongue across Luffy's fingers until they're damp, teething at the bump of his knuckles, still in his way.

"I want to," Luffy whines, scent sweet, a balm over Zoro's growing unease the more Luffy tells him no no no.

"After the Solstice. My heat."

Why not now? Zoro doesn't understand, noses at Luffy's throat instead, feels pitiful when he whines at the omega denying him for reasons that don't matter.

"Want– *Zoro*. Wanna—" Luffy squirms at Zoro's fangs grazing his neck, nowhere near a scent gland, but he could dig in here, holes into Luffy's jugular and spill his blood and—

"Want Zoro to want *me*. Without the collar."

Zoro draws back, at Luffy's insistent hands, his big puppy eyes as he cups Zoro's face with both hands dramatically. Forces him to make eye contact. The silly, bright halo of joy around Luffy has quieted into something unsure, small, dull.

"Can say all the words in every way, but this collar binds Zoro to Raftel. Not *me*. I can… I get to remove it after the Solstice. If Zoro wants to mate me, for real, I want it when he's not a chained alpha," he whispers.

"Luffy," Zoro presses a kiss against Luffy's wobbling mouth, noses against the scar under his eye, "there is no amount of gold or chains that would make me not want to be your alpha. Your mate."

Proving himself, always having to prove something. Zoro sends a silent, ugly, hell-snarling curse to every dead alpha that once was bound to Luffy, for striking such worries into his mind like this.

But fine. If he has to wait he will. Until the Sun rises and sets again. Again. Again. Zoro kisses Luffy even through the salt of his silent tears.

Zoro can wait until after the Solstice, if Luffy asks him.

What kind of Alpha would he be, if he could not obey his Omega?

Chapter End Notes

genuinely such an exciting chapter for me to write, this and the next chapter are the most beautiful and colorful and happy chapters of the story, and my faaavvvvs ((≧(〃＞ ᴗ ＜〃)≦))

also?!?! congrats!! the slow burn has come to fruition! luzo sexy times finally upon us!! i hope it was to your liking, and i must remind you that these two do switch during this story, so don't get too comfortable with your top/bottom preferences

i am hoping to have ch 7 done by xmas, so wait for me darlings, the solstice festival is upon us!! ٩(^ᗜ^)و

p.s. many many smooches for my comment-leavers, i swear to you every ao3 email brightens my day and puts a fire under my ass to keep working, you guys are so awesome and lovely ilyilyilyilyily

edit (1/3/26): added the art piece i commed from the very lovely @nekokat42

Chapter 7: VII

Chapter Summary

THE SUMMER SOLSTICE

Chapter Notes

▶ -`¸ ꕥ✓☼ᴗꕥ ´- click me open for the full A/N!!! -`¸ ꕥ✓☼ᴗꕥ ´-

See the end of the chapter for more notes

For the first time since he has been in Raftel, Zoro sleeps in Luffy's room.

It's larger than the room Zoro has been sleeping in and is covered in rugs and drapes and blankets on nearly every corner Zoro can see. In every way Zoro could think of one, it feels like a nest, fit for royalty. Red curtains and rugs with delicate swirls and rays of yellow and gold. Everything soft but beautiful and ornate.

The bed is grand, soft, covered in heavy wool blankets and mink-soft furs and velvet and satin. Luffy doesn't hesitate to jump right into the bed completely naked, kicking a few of what looks like *dozens* of pillows to make room and eagerly pat a place for Zoro to get in.

No formal invitation, no sweet eyes, no induction ritual or trust exchange or scenting. Just Luffy, who smiles at him and tells him that Zoro can get in bed with him and not worry about 'sweating the whole bed up' since it would just rub his scent into the threads.

Zoro does, though he keeps his soft linen sleep-pants on, a little confused but happy to take the very open offer to climb into the omega's nest. Be entirely engulfed in his scent in a way that is immediately trying to pull his nose into the pillows and put him to sleep.

Maybe he should be more on guard, have a bit more shame, but when Luffy crawls under his arm, snuggles in and all but melts into the half-hug, Zoro can't help but let every wall he's tried to build up crumble down.

Zoro doesn't dream, even though he thought he would. Nothing out of place, no childhood remembrance, no ominous vision, no pure white herald, no tears, no heat, no sunshine. Just darkness.

Maybe he should have looked into the nothing for something. Like the void in and of itself was the message.

Zoro wakes up feeling wet. Not in a way that comes with sweating in his sleep or a way that feels like Kuina sneaking into his quarters to dump water on him.

He's *wet*. The hot-slick kind, the one that makes him all too aware that blood and flesh is wet, the insides of himself are wet, just under his skin. Soaked and full and pleasure-numb at his fingertips.

Zoro groans, *wet* pleasure that slithers up his spine, feels all too much and just right to make his toes curl as he fights to wake up entirely, brain still fuzzy, eyelids heavy, tongue thick in his mouth.

He opens his eyes and finds it's still dark in the room, but there's the echoes of dawn on the ceiling, a premonition of the sun rising, not yet, but soon. Enough to turn the night, to let Zoro know it is *very* early morning.

Luffy isn't on his chest where he'd fallen asleep, but Zoro can feel him, warm against his body still.

There's another weird sparkle of pleasure under his skin, in his bones, and Zoro feels his eyes falling shut when he moans again, like he's one more dangerous breath away from drifting back to sleep.

Oh. *Oh*, he's getting *hard*. That's what this is.

He hears another moan, one that isn't his own, and fights to open his eyes again, looking down at the suspicious lump under the blankets. Zoro reaches down and pulls the blankets up off his body to look inside—

Wide grey eyes blink at him, pitch, a vague shadow in the darkness of the bed, hard to see a true form without any light in the room. But Zoro can see Luffy's surprise morph into something warm, sappy, and the glint of his white teeth as he grins, the flutter of those dark lashes before he tilts his head, mouth dropped open and tongue wet hot *licking* as it trails the underside of Zoro's cock.

Zoro can't think, thoughts muddled, flat, clouded over as he can only feel warm and soaked and— heat.

Heat.

Honey and hyacinths and *slick*.

"Luffy, you're–"

There's something mumbled to him but Zoro's dropping his head back into the pillows, grinding his teeth, because Luffy's trying to say whatever the hell it is with Zoro's dick stuffed into one cheek, tongue curling and lapping and suckling at the same time.

The scent of Luffy is stronger now, blooming, stifling, holding Zoro down. Between one aching heart throb between his legs and the next, he's opening his eyes again, finding Luffy's fingers now

in front of his face.

They're wet. *Soaked*, actually.

Zoro feels his mouth watering, opening as they touch his bottom lip, and feels every cell in his brain turn off when the taste of Luffy's slick hits his tongue.

Zoro latches on, sucks, lazy and uncoordinated the same way Luffy is sucking his dick, but Zoro's treat is limited and after a few swallows, Luffy's fingers are entirely clean and trying to draw out of his mouth. Zoro whines at it, teeth, sucking, hoping that if he follows those retreating fingers he can somehow find more slick that he'd missed.

"*Easy*," Luffy's voice tells him, doing nothing to soothe him until those fingers come back, dripping with slick again and shove past his lips.

"Here you go. Good boy, Zoro," Luffy's pressing those wet fingers back on his tongue, coating him to the back of his throat, and Zoro forgets how to even breathe.

He misses the other whispered praises, *good alpha*, pretty, strong, handsome, tastes good, feels good.

Fuck, he's–

Gods, his knot is fucking aching, swelling already and Zoro is still melted to the bed, drowning in slick and heat and Luffy. What a way to wake up and die. Happily, Zoro doesn't even struggle to breathe, laps and sucks Luffy's fingers until his chest is burning and his head is pounding—

Air rushes into his lungs as Luffy's fingers yank free, spit that dribbles off Zoro's chin and mouth and trails down his chest as Luffy's hand drags down. Zoro is filled with those fingers again, into his ass and Zoro's pleasantly surprised at how easy it is, again.

He keeps expecting pain, tight, blood, but Luffy is shockingly gentle with him, wet and slow and playing his body like he's known his way around it for *years*.

More mouth, distracting. Luffy's mouth is hot on his belly, tongue against his skin and tracing the ridges of his abs while his fingers go from two to three, twist, find that little spot inside of him that makes him gasp. Luffy's lips curve into a smile as Zoro's stomach flinches under his mouth. He's pressing a kiss against his navel, makes Zoro groan with a mix of *weird* and *good* and *strange* when he fucking sticks his tongue into it.

But what the hell can he even do? It feels good and right and if Luffy wants to eat him from the outside in, so be it.

His cock throbs, halfway knotted around nothing, dripping with precum and Luffy's spit, knocking the underside of Luffy's chin when the omega's not paying attention in his trail of open mouthed kisses down Zoro's v-line.

"Inside?" Zoro thinks he hears Luffy mumbling, asking with his mouth full and occupied again.

Swallowing roughly, he nods numbly against the pillows, heavy, spinning, aching.

Please. *Please*. *Please*.

Luffy's mouth is around him again, silky gums and hot wiggling tongue and an obscene slurp echoing in the room when he takes Zoro's cock all the way down to the knot. Those fingers inside are poking, rubbing, spreading him open the same time Luffy fucking *swallows* around him.

"Gods, *please*."

Zoro scrambles, fingers clutching at the sheets, spiraling out of control like Luffy just kicked him in the gut instead.

He's cumming.

He's *cumming*.

Faster than he can open his mouth and warn Luffy, because all that comes out is a wheezed moan and something embarrassingly broken. Luffy's swallowing again and again and again, throat squeezing the tip of Zoro's cock each time, entirely unbothered.

The fingers inside of him keep pressing, curling, rubbing Zoro's orgasm out of him as his knot keeps pulsing, flooding Luffy's throat white until that edge of overstimulation starts to creep in. Luffy keeps sucking, insistent, tongue lapping at Zoro's knot and stretched lips like he's about to go deeper and take his knot into his mouth too.

Just when Zoro is about to reach down and pull Luffy away from trying it, the omega is sitting up off him. Zoro's cock drops against his thigh, wet, and Luffy's fingers slip out gently.

Zoro catches the way Luffy is licking his lips, smiling as he crawls over Zoro's lap, up his body until he's straddling Zoro's chest.

"Zoro too?" he asks, and maybe his orgasm knocked his entire head around because he can't decipher what Luffy is actually asking him for. Zoro stares up at Luffy, the long, mouthwatering span of dark skin, soft belly, perked nipples, the line of his throat, a scar under an eye. A figure in the dark, a dream, a hallucination, something lucid come to life from his wild fantasies.

Luffy giggles at his silence, dry hand pushing back through Zoro's bangs, sweaty, keeping his head back against the pillow as Luffy kneels over his shoulders.

"We don't get anything to eat today for the Solstice. So if you wanna not have an empty stomach…"

Ah.

Zoro's mouth drops open naturally as Luffy's hips rise over his chin. Now he understands.

Yes. Please. *Please*.

Luffy's hands brace against the wall behind the headboard, and through the morning dark, he's able to see Zoro's eyes unfocused and rolling back the moment his tongue drags through a messy smear of slick on the inside of Luffy's thigh.

There's a rattle in Zoro's chest, almost a growl, a ghost of a purr, as he uses his tongue to trace the slick all the way up to the source.

Luffy's hole is soft, wet with slick that coats Zoro's tongue when he sucks at it. And fuck he can't have enough of it, *sweet*, filling his mouth and sticking him together. Ambrosia; and Zoro is not planning on wasting any as he leads with his tongue, moans the same time Luffy does when it breaches inside.

"Wanna fuck me?" Luffy breathes, hips rocking to ride his tongue in shallow back and forths of his hips. Zoro can feel himself hard again in between one breath and the next. If Luffy wants him to, Zoro would give *anything*—

"Mmh, but Zoro's hole felt so good yesterday… So good~ *Aaah*~ What do I do?"

Luffy babbles quietly to the walls, to himself, falling on deaf ears. Luffy's thighs around his ears, Zoro just hears his pretty omega's voice, body slick and sweet and overwhelmingly close to his heat. Days. Maybe hours?

Zoro growls again, a strain in his neck when he curls his tongue inside of Luffy, finds his hands on Luffy's waist to squeeze, pulling him down onto his face more. Swallows the mouthful before searching for more.

"Would be mean, hm? Never letting you fuck me? Would Zoro be sad? *A-aaahthererightthere*~ But Zoro's so happy where he is right now, isn't he? Under me."

Zoro thinks he hears something about *mine* and *perfect* and *alpha*, but it's all melting into one steady stream of Luffy whining, moaning, walls squeezing around Zoro's tongue as he swallows down slick until it's too thinned out from his own drool, alpha fangs scraping at Luffy's soft skin when he opens wider.

Zoro's lightheaded again but he'll be damned if he stops.

Ah— But the pulling, sharp pain in his scalp starts to get to be too much. His claws rake lines in supple, honeyed skin when Luffy rises on his knees, takes the hand out of Zoro's hair to slap against his forehead and hold his head down.

Panting, Zoro open his eyes to see what's wrong, ready to open his mouth again and beg, *beg* his omega to come back, let him finish, needs more, more, more—

Luffy's scent is growing sweeter, a sharp bloom of hyacinths that turns too much, cloying, and there's a rope of wet heat across his eye and cheek. Those soft thighs are trembling against his temples, all Zoro would need to do is follow his lips to the side, find the swollen scent gland in Luffy's thighs and *bite* to claim and—

"*Zoro*," Luffy growls at him, a command that swoops in Zoro's belly. His mouth opens–

Luffy's cock is in his mouth now, still throbbing, pulses of cum against the roof of his mouth, filling him until he closes and sucks. Luffy is taking one of his hands, pulling it up his chest until he can get Zoro's fingers in between his teeth, nipping, sucking.

Gods. Zoro can only swallow, swallow, swallow, feeling his skin burning, cock standing painfully hard between his legs, body achingly empty, all responding to the siren call of Luffy's preheat.

Luffy finishes until he's nothing but twitching muscle, cock still heavy on Zoro's tongue as he pats the top of green hair.

Patpatpat.

“Good. Zoro’s so good.”

His alpha *sings* with it, yes, he *is* so very good, isn’t he? Where his first waking sensations and taste and *everything* are his omega.

Before his eyes could have even opened he *existed* for Luffy.

The patting turns to nails across his scalp, scratching lightly, behind an ear, and then combing through his bangs to get them off his face again. Zoro doesn’t know what to do other than swallow, tongue and belly and heart begging for just *one more* mouthful.

Luffy pokes a single finger between his eyebrows, purring.

“Okay. Let go. ‘M done.”

Zoro most certainly does *not* let go. Tongue’s the softening cock in his mouth like there’s anything left in it for him.

Luffy pokes him again, harder, more of a flick.

“Then should we just stay in bed all day? Shishi, skip the Solstice? Is Zoro gonna fight off the priests when they come get us? Wake up, dummy.”

Did he close his eyes again? Ugh, Zoro can’t think right when his nose is buried between Luffy’s legs, has this taste filling his mouth, senses flooded with omega and hyacinths and sunshine and honey. Fuck.

Luffy finally is able to draw away from him, though he doesn’t go far, plopping onto the sheets next to Zoro with a breathless little laugh. His mouth is against Zoro’s cheek, wet, sticky, morning breath and cum and it *should* be gross, but Zoro’s rolling over to kiss him anyway.

The room is brighter, gold, and he realizes that the sun has begun to crest the horizon outside, bringing the morning of the Summer Solstice.

The beginning of the day is a disorienting number of people buzzing around them.

Zoro has not experienced being enthralled by an omega about to start their heat before. He’s heard of it, the power that omegas in heat hold, pheromones and their very existence having an indomitable pull to ensure a mate. But Zoro had only heard the same number of people discrediting it as much as they talked it up like some sort of hypnosis power omegas held, to the point where Zoro chalked the talk up to being an exaggerated truth. Something in between myth and fact.

As he is stumbling towards the baths again, Luffy further along ahead with a bounce in his step and reeking of cum and slick, Zoro is starting to believe those claims. Like there’s cotton filled in his head, the ghost of Luffy’s taste on his gums keeping him docile, trailing after the omega as Luffy

shamelessly lets his pheromones fill the hallways, a crumb trail for Zoro the dumb alpha to follow along.

Unlike last night, the servants pile into the baths with them and quickly Zoro finds himself drenched in oil-scented waters, multiple hands scrubbing him over, twice around until his skin is pink and stinging.

What can he do but watch as Luffy gets the same treatment, taking the scrubbing in stride, only giving a roll of his eyes when he holds his arms out to the side and lets the servants bathe him, scrub his teeth clean, tame the bedhead into a sudsy lather before being combed out.

Luffy catches him staring a few times, smiles at him teasingly, like he knows exactly how empty Zoro's mind is right now. Nothing but wind and rocks to rattle around up there. But he doesn't voice any teasing that Zoro was sure would come.

They're quietly rushed out of the baths and further back into a dressing room.

It *almost* feels like his final day in Shimotsuki village, being doted on and fussed over like a doll. Even though he's been put through this once and had plenty of time to get used to it as the seamstress granny prepared his garments for this day, Zoro can't find himself used to it.

The hands on him are gentle and professional, light and never touching him longer than necessary. He doesn't need any direction, yet finds himself looking to Luffy like the omega could offer him some tips or advice on how to make this any easier.

Luffy has been placed on a small, raised square of stone in the middle of the room, and he stands there looking incredibly bored. Distant. All too used to this treatment. There are three big mirrors in a semicircle in front of where Luffy stands, allowing for a view of Luffy's back and front at the same glance.

Zoro finds himself entertained with watching the methodical way Luffy is dressed, entirely naked before being *layered* in silk.

Zoro is used to Luffy in casual, airy and threadbare linens, robes, cotton that flows against his skin and leaves his movements free. Short hemmed boring old robes or well-worn pants and a light vest. The occasional gold bracelet or two. Nothing nearly as intricate or fanciful as what they put Luffy in now.

Chains, bangles, beads of scarlet and orange, thin chains of gold around his waist, laid over his hips, his wrists, his ankles. A solid band of gold twisted into an elegant swirl of laurels is placed onto Luffy's upper arms each side, gold chain leads from the bands to connect to the ones on Luffy's hands.

There's the thinnest of red silk draped on those bands on Luffy's arms and Zoro loses track of where they attach as Luffy gets wrapped up in red. There are three servants working around Luffy at the same time, pleating, draping, wrapping, dressing. Most of Luffy's torso is left bare, simply covered in jewelry that drapes in various lengths down his chest and his hips and legs are entirely covered in vivid red before even *more* gold is placed over that.

It must be terribly heavy, yet Luffy stands strong and still wrapped up in maroons, ruby reds, saffron.

Luffy's layers adorned him piece by piece. Lavish enough to bathe a god. It starts with a thin layer of fabric around his waist, folded between his legs to keep him decent.

There's really only three layers of the red fabrics but Zoro's eyes get lost with the various see throughs and beads and gold embroidery. The fabric is intricately woven with gold thread that catches the light just right with movement, swirls and rays of sunlight inlaid with tiny beads that glitter like gem shards with the thread.

He's *beautiful*.

The final touches are red-stained silk layers that do nothing to hide the details underneath, but it gives Luffy an almost hazed aura around his figure. Makes him seem ethereal. Where it reaches his nude waist, it brings out the deeper undertone of Luffy's skin, sunkissed, smooth—

"Zoro's going to ruin his clothes if he drools that much," Luffy's voice snaps his attention.

Flustered, Zoro turns away, only to find Luffy's gaze in the mirror grinning at him there too, teasing, all teeth, before he has to turn when a servant gently directs him.

"I'm not drooling. I'm just trying to figure out how they're putting this all together so I don't have to cut it off myself later."

Zoro himself isn't used to the more elegant clothing. Shares Luffy's inclination to more comfortable clothes in his day to day than anything that shows off his status as the kingdom's Alpha. Always a light yukata or simple robe and breeches. Things easy to pull off or stretch when it got hot, clothes that he didn't have to worry about sitting the right way or moving particularly to not pull on delicate threads, things he was comfortable with.

"Ooh and here I thought Zoro might just rip it off me."

Zoro coughs, inhaling his own gasp in a way that chokes him.

Gods, *someone's* having fun teasing Zoro today, isn't he? Zoro's face certainly must match Luffy's skirts by now, but he stubbornly keeps his eyes down on himself rather than wandering lest Luffy find something else to tease him about.

He hadn't realized that the servants were working simultaneously. He's been so focused on Luffy…

Zoro is almost in a similar state of dress.

His clothes are heavier, bulkier, compared to Luffy's, but they lay on him in a way that is flattering, somehow slimming despite all of his muscle. He blinks at himself in the mirror.

He never saw himself like this in the ceremonial robes that he wore on his first day, head on and full bodied, but he had looked down at himself. These, *these* on him now, are so much more ornate and delicate.

He damn near looks the part of a deity, as blasphemous as the thought is.

Zoro is also in red, though the color is much darker, wine and ripe currants and lifeblood. His skirts are similar to Luffy's, floor length from his waist, ornately pleated near his ankles in a way that

they stay out of his way for walking. There are golden bangles around his ankles, a light chime of metal on metal as the small golden beads and miniature bells hit one another.

Gold bands his arms, swirls like vines along muscle, draping red silk, more gold chain and waist beads and jewelry that warms against his skin instantly.

The gold around his throat nearly doubles with his collar taking the main focal. They don't bother to drape him with anything on his chest or his back, leaving his skin on display with the glint of the metal that adorns him.

Zoro turns at the waist in the mirror, this way and that to watch the way even just a slight shift of his foot sends the skirts around his knees flowing gently. The embroidery and beads shine as they catch the light, and dare he admit he's rather impressed with the seamstress Granny making such a work of art. The level of detail is incredible, something new to awe at the longer he looks.

The movement he has in the skirts is surprisingly airy and free. He'd expected to be weighed down but he feels like he could be surprisingly agile in these. A servant to his left pipes up, tells him that his garments are very flattering for him.

Unconsciously, Zoro thinks about how Luffy is more so, he doesn't know why anyone would be looking at him when—

Ah.

Now it's Luffy who is caught staring.

"Zoro's pretty in red."

A few of the dozens of hands still nitpicking at their hems and jewelry titter in agreement, smiles and soft touches and praise. Zoro feels his ears growing hot, but this time he doesn't look away from Luffy's gaze, takes it, watching the appreciative roam of Luffy's eyes going down down down.

"I want more earrings," Luffy barks quietly, turns back to the mirror with a melodic clink of gold, and examines his own ears in his reflection. Almost a childish haughtiness to him.

"There's some needles around here somewhere," Luffy mutters, mostly airing his thoughts aloud. Zoro huffs, breaking away from the now nervous looking servants who are trying to figure out how to tell Luffy *no*.

He comes around to Luffy's side, unbothered when Luffy doesn't pay him any attention, too busy with pinching at his own earlobes, single pierced, and muttering about finding the right place to pierce a second hole in his lobe.

Zoro doesn't look into the mirror as he removes the topmost dangle from his set of three.

"Wear one of mine, if you want something more. We don't have time to give you any new piercings, you're going to stress everyone out."

"I'm not stressing them out!" Luffy huffs, but eagerly watches Zoro as he reaches over and unclips the small hoop in Luffy's left lobe, replacing it with the long drop of gold from his own.

Luffy happily looks at himself in the mirrors again, smile growing. He looks at Zoro, eyes the other two pairs of dangles, and now the small hoop Zoro exchanged sitting above the two.

“Hm… I guess this will do,” Luffy declares, and the servants around them all breathe out in relief. Though Zoro definitely catches a girl keeping a tight grip on the metal case of needles in case Luffy spontaneously changes his mind.

The *procession*— Zoro calls it for what it is: a parade— starts in the main hall of the temple. The very place he started in this kingdom. That very opulent, grand room that took Zoro’s breath away the first time he saw it.

They are both brought up to the throne, set up high at the far end of the room. The last time he paid this stage any mind, Luffy had been lounged across it with almost dead eyes and flat soul. Zoro hadn’t known then that that omega could be so much brighter, warmer. That his entry into Raftel would light that spark.

“Zoro’s nervous?” Luffy snickers at him and Zoro watches as Luffy clinks across to the throne with the echoes of gold anklets and bangles and the soft swish of robes, drops into the seat *properly*, feet on the ground and everything, and then gestures to the small kneeling pillow at his side.

He takes the hems of his heavy robes, skirts and fabric and embroidery and beads that clatter softly as he makes his way to Luffy’s side and kneels there. Naturally. This feels…

Natural.

Right.

Luffy’s hand brushes over Zoro’s shoulder, fingertips warm as they play with the multitude of gold adorning Zoro’s skin, flitting between the chains and beads and soft layers of gauze until he reaches the solid band of Zoro’s collar.

“Not as long as I have you,” Zoro answers with a small turn of his head, not paying attention to the servants that are leaving them alone up here. All he cares about is Luffy there at his side, his soft touch, weight to keep him on the ground.

“Sappy,” Luffy whispers to him, meaning an insult, but Zoro can’t help but smile fondly. Sappy indeed, everything is sticky when it comes to Luffy, honied, caramelized, syrupy. Sappy. Sticky like pine resin, hard to wash off, getting on *everything*.

There is a pull on his collar, the faintest tug to the side, and Zoro turns his eyes to it. Luffy directing him. He leans that way from his kneel, shoulder bumping Luffy’s legs until the omega puts his head against his knee.

“If only I could keep Zoro like this for the rest of the day, I could actually enjoy the Solstice.”

If that is what he wished.

Zoro could find a way to make it happen.

Somehow, to break the festivities or whatever they're about to do here. He could tuck himself between Luffy's feet and kneel there until the sun went down and the Solstice was over. All Luffy would have to do is ask. Command it. Zoro would fight even the heavens to make it happen.

Luffy's touch against the side of his head turns from petting to a soft press of his palm, keeping Zoro's head against his leg, neck bared. He can feel the press of metal on his skin, not warm from his body, but he can't pick his head up to look.

Luffy isn't usually so particular, seemingly detail oriented on Zoro's collar and the chains around it…

There's a snick, metal on metal, and the weight around his throat lessens.

It's not some big explosion of movement or freedom, just a dull drop, weight in his lap, as his collar now sits loose and cracked wide open in between his thighs rather than around his neck.

He stares at it, the band of gold among the folds of red fabric, ornate patterns within the crimson dye, golden embellishment, and the collar…

It blends into the elegant, pretty things. Reminds him that the collar did belong here, in Raftel, *to* the kingdom. And he had played the part.

There are still chains and ropes of gold around his neck, but none that bind him, and Luffy is idly laying them neatly, re-draping the metal after being skewed by the collar dropping away.

Zoro can't find himself to pick his head up off Luffy's leg, stays bowed into his omega with a weight that feels a thousand times heavier than some bond-collar. Some sort of welling in his chest, up into his throat.

Luffy's arm reaches down and he takes the collar out of Zoro's lap, a dainty gold key clinks against it, and then he holds it out to the side, away from himself, away from Zoro. A servant stumbles, tripping up the stairs to take it from Luffy's grasp.

"Destroy it," Luffy says, and his hand pets over Zoro's head, toys with the length of green starting at his temple, "melt it, throw it away, sell it, I don't care."

Zoro looks, finally. Picks his head up and Luffy doesn't try to stop him.

He's closer now, than he was the first day he came to Raftel. But he is still on his knees all the same. Still looking up at Luffy. Still seeing the Sun for all Its glory and bright warmth.

Freedom.

Luffy is glowing with it. All tan skin and jet black hair, eyes that almost shimmer like silver, a smile that rivals the sun in the sky, the rays that stretch in through the windows reaching for their kin. Luffy dwarfs them, stronger, brighter.

This time, Zoro doesn't burn when he *looks*.

"Should I claim you here and now?" Luffy whispers seriously, but his eyes dance with a laughter that he doesn't sound, knowing the answer without needing to ask.

Zoro forgets himself, forgets the pillow under his knees, the hard marble, the dozens of eyes watching them, the whispers from people watching them.

He bares his neck, on purpose this time, *with* purpose. Wanting.

Luffy purrs at him, a hand under Zoro's chin to right his head, fix his posture out of submission, out of baring himself for a claim, and even though Zoro's alpha is taking it as a rejection, he can damn near taste the rush of sweet that blooms from between Luffy's legs.

He's kneeling there, of course he can tell when Luffy is slicking, just a few hours ago his tongue was *inside* of him. Fuck, Luffy is so close to his heat, not even trying to hide his arousal. Zoro's mouth waters, and everything in himself is so close to *begging* it's obscene.

"Not yet. My turn to say not yet, hm? Zoro likes that phrase, doesn't he? *Not yet*."

His tongue is heavy, stomach twisting. No. No he *hates* that phrase. Wants *now*. *Now*.

"Shh, Zoro's so loud, growling like that." Luffy snickers, and there's finally a crack in his smug grin, the way his face flushes, and he puts a hand on top of Zoro's head and pushes. He hadn't realized he somehow had worked his way in between Luffy's knees, started to nuzzle the inside of his thighs, had found the split of fabric in his skirts in order to reach skin.

"Can make it to sunset and it's yours. I'll be yours. Zoro."

Luffy's fingers are warm, possessive, but soft as they press against his skin, his jawline, to his ear where his thumb plays with the line of the two gold drops in Zoro's ear.

"But Zoro doesn't need a collar or a *bite* to know that, do you?" Luffy's fingers pull on the gold earrings, and the ache of it, the pain, the want, his knot, and Zoro growls at Luffy for it, who only smiles before releasing him, "My Alpha."

Luffy had ushered Zoro back to his seat after everything and while he was distantly aware that people kept looking up at them, whispering, *talking* about them and the obviously missing collar and the damn scent that came off the throne stage, Zoro felt it all as background.

Luffy was a grounding, solid presence at his shoulder. Just one step above him.

It felt a little odd to be up here too, but his alpha was reasonable. Being close meant better protection, faster time to reach him, to be in between whoever wanted to come to Luffy even if he didn't have a weapon on him.

As the morning grew brighter, the sun creeping closer to midday, so did the piles of offerings on the floor of the temple. Most of it was food and gold, fruits and crops and flowers and herbs, spices, salt, gold, gems, piles of silk. Enough to choke greed itself.

It only made him hungry, eyeing the meat that would be brought in, sometimes by the hands of *dozens*, butchers and farmers and normal citizens of the kingdom. All fresh offerings, sacrifices.

Most things that would spoil were silently and secretly pulled away from the temple floor and brought back to the kitchens where Zoro was sure they would be cooked for the next few days.

Zoro kept his face forward, shoulders back, chin up. It was easy to ignore the growing numb tingle in his legs from kneeling for so long. Luffy's hand remained at his back, his shoulder, his neck, somewhere. Always a point of contact to let him know he was still there, hadn't somehow drifted off into the heavens to play in the sky with the sun and the clouds where he likely belonged.

It's entertaining at least when there seems to be an entire section of offerings brought in only by children. They all come in a slow and disorganized group with their small arms full with flowers and scrolls upon scrolls of papyrus, drawings and art. As they all set their armfuls down, the children stay near the corners of the stage, loud and bright as they laugh among each other, jumping around, some dancing, others being so bold as to wave up at him and Luffy.

Luffy doesn't give them any attention aside from sticking his tongue out at one of the older children when they do it, which of course means there's a fit of giggles among the little ones as they scurry around a column to hide like they've done something grievously bad.

There's a handful of adults that round the children up when they have all set down their offerings and Zoro can't help but smile at the chaos in trying to corral all of the kids back out of the temple without knocking anything over or losing track of any of them. A small laugh shakes his shoulders, but it's nothing more than a rush of air from his nose.

"Zoro likes kids?" Luffy whispers.

He doesn't turn his head, watching the room growing fuller with baskets and flowers and gifts. He gives a small hum, considering. Once he became a teenager, Shimotsuki village separated the younger children for more age appropriate education and physical training. He never had much chance to handle small ones.

"They're funny. Wouldn't say I get along with em, though."

"Zoro's soft, would be really good with kids, I bet. They'd like you. Very cool when holding a sword."

"Eh, I'm not cool *without* my swords?"

"Hmm," Luffy doesn't elaborate, doesn't say yes or no.

Before Zoro can wheedle Luffy into admitting that he's cool— *he is*— there is a procession of girls that trail down the last little clear area of the hall in the center, leaving more flower petals of various orange and pink and reds in their wake. The sandstone and marble and mosaic tiles of the temple floor can't even be seen now with the amount of things covering the ground.

"Ah, *finally*," Luffy sighs, and he stretches his legs out in front of himself in preparation to stand.

A group of men appear at the door, carrying in a flat wooden litter. A glorified platform really, just enough room on its empty top that Zoro assumes that he and Luffy will be going down there soon.

They bring the pallet all the way to the stairs at the back end of the throne dais.

There are six men on each end of it, all dressed in white with veils so thick Zoro cannot see their faces, but the bulk of their arms and legs reassures him that these aren't any priests or old elders from the temple.

"We're supposed to be carried down and out of the palace. No walking. Dumb symbolism of the sun setting," Luffy makes a small gagging noise in his ear and Zoro has to school his expression to not laugh, knowing Luffy is rolling his eyes behind him.

Luffy stands with a gentle shuffle of fabric and gold. For a moment, Zoro waits on his knees, watches him from his place until Luffy pauses in front of him. He puts his hand out in offering, palm down, and Zoro easily meets him.

Luffy doesn't pull him up but Zoro feels solid with Luffy's hand in his, stronger as he leads and takes them down the steps. The small wooden platform is enough to seat both of them side by side and Luffy pushes his weight into Zoro's supporting hand as he steps up onto it and takes his place.

As Zoro steps foot onto the wooden platform, there is the huge, thundering boom of drums that echo in the hall. He almost flinches at the noise but Luffy's hand tightens in his, and the sudden burst of laughter that brightens Luffy's voice is drowned out in the procession of drums that cascade one after another.

Music that bursts into the hall. Strings and flutes and cymbals, more drums.

Luffy quickly pulls Zoro in to sit with him, giggling to himself at Zoro's wide eyes at the way the room erupts into joyful hysteria.

People along the walls begin to cheer, there are marigolds and roses and jasmine thrown in handfuls of whole flowers and petals alike among the already flower-crowded floor, and the rush of people form a crowd ahead of them as they begin to exit the temple.

Zoro didn't feel that the day was truly a festival until now, loud and colorful and boisterous.

Torches are lit as they go, flames brightening the hallways in the palace as they leave. When they are brought to the front entrance of the palace, at the top of the long, *many* steps that lead down into the city, Zoro squints at the bright blue sky and the sun overhead.

It must be midday.

Zoro is incredibly grateful for the lack of any clothes on the top half of his body and the surprising breathability of his skirts. It's achingly hot outside, directly in the sun of the Summer Solstice.

Luffy looks like he's enjoying himself though, eyes closed and head tipped back. Zoro watches the tense line of muscle in his shoulders relaxing, the way the gold around his throat and collarbones shines in the sunlight. Zoro's mouth waters.

Swallowing, he looks elsewhere, down in the open courtyard of the palace below where there are *thousands* of people.

There is a large pile of wood and logs carefully arranged in the middle of the space and still being stacked and positioned at the edges by burly men. Zoro can only imagine how intense the fire would be from it being lit. Shimotsuki village only ever made small pyres for funerals, never for celebrations or festivals. Such high energy never befit the calm and peaceful village.

The people of Raftel are all colorfully dressed in various shades of the sunset. There are people along the sides of the streets with food stalls out of the way of the open space with flavorful smoke coming from grills, small ovens, and open small flames alike. Children are weaving between people's legs, giggling among each other with toys in their hands, pinwheels, kites, sugar spun birds on sticks, candy.

It's quite different from what Zoro is used to in the palace, of quiet and timid servants, a shaded mood that weighs everyone down without realizing it. Reverence among a god like Nika, even if he was nowhere to be found.

They begin their descent with the steady beat of drums. A slow, easy procession that Zoro doesn't pay much mind to until they're finally at the bottom of the steps and when he looks back, the grand marble and sandstone of the palace towers over them like a monolith, casting an overwhelming shade from the sun.

Zoro didn't realize just how far removed from the kingdom they had been, up there nearly in the clouds themselves.

Down here it's cooler, the afternoon shade of the buildings and palace don't stop people from happily celebrating the sun. The Solstice, as it draws to an end. If anything, the lower the sun crawls, the louder and more excited the people get.

Luffy has started to sway slightly to the music, subtle in the way one could mistake it for the natural rocking of the movement from the platform they're seated on being carried down the stairs, but the men are doing a surprisingly good job at keeping them steady enough.

There's another set of stairs, a flight that leads down into the courtyard itself, but they stop there. The bottom of the palace steps, but not quite allowed to be among the common people. Zoro notices that the veiled men lower them gently, and then remain flanked around the platform like walls.

Among all the fun festivities, they're still guarded heavily, like any of these people would consider running up here to harm one of them.

Or maybe it's just to protect Luffy's so called purity.

Nika's.

What a stupid thought. A stupid ideology. Zoro is reminded of how much this place makes him want to scream, to take the priests and shake them until whatever cotton stuffed into their heads falls loose.

If only they could open their eyes and *see* Luffy.

Because all Zoro can see is Luffy.

The drum beats change, from the droning, steady procession into a faster tempo, one set and then two. Taking a rhythm almost akin to a heartbeat.

The crowd around the pyre has backed away from it and quickly a line of women rush around it on their toes, small steps that make their bodies look like they're floating. Luffy finds them entertaining at least, Zoro can hear his soft laughter behind his shoulder.

They sway and dance to the drums as the crowds at the periphery clap along. It's pretty, very complicated and enthralling to watch, and Zoro realized that all of his dance lessons before were child's play compared to this performance.

All coordinated together, painting a picture as they circle around and around and around the dry wood, their colorful dresses and skirts flowing and swaying and billowing as they jump and skip and bow between one another. That is until the sky has grown orange pink from the sunset, and a loud horn calls from somewhere high up in the palace.

Zoro isn't used to such a loud sound, hasn't heard anything like it before but it sounds like danger, a call that something is wrong…?

He glances up at the palace stairs, glancing at Luffy when he pats him on the knee a few times excitedly, and then looks back at Ace.

Ace who stands halfway down the palace steps with a stunning layer of black skirts and a loose robe hooked onto his shoulders, all of it hemmed with gold, scarlet red beads that pop color around his throat, down his chest, around his waist. It's all *glowing* as he holds a bow as large as his own body and an arrow alight with flame.

Zoro feels entranced, seeing a new, serious side of Ace is breathtaking. He's really only known the other as an aloof and polite older brother, joking around, slouching, falling asleep in the most ridiculous places. As he is now, Ace could rival Apollo with his flames and bow.

Ace doesn't make any unnecessary movements, steady as he raises his arms, a hitch of his elbow, taking aim down into the courtyard. The robe slips off Ace's shoulders and flutters around his ankles, but he pays it no mind as he draws and notches the flaming arrow.

Even from this distance, Zoro can see the sharp focus, dark eyes that dance with the flicker of the flames he wields. The muscles in Ace's shoulders and biceps flex, a sheen of sweat across gold skin, chest expanding on a breath as he pulls back further, and the sharp snap of the bowstring as he looses.

It flies straight and frighteningly accurate, right to the top of the pyre which erupts into flames, the wood must have been doused in fuel for it to catch so quickly, and the heat that fans off the massive flame tower has Zoro sweating even from this distance, he can't imagine what the dancers circling it must feel.

Voices carry, a mixture of wordless cheering and laughter, wishes to others on a happy solstice, a warm sun festival, blessings exchanged in the same prayer Zoro has heard over and over.

May the Sun warm your face and Its light enveil your soul.

Luffy's voice carries when he raises it suddenly, a victorious cry, startling even the guards standing around them when he whoops.

"ACE! YOU'RE THE COOLEST!"

Luffy laughs, airy and bright, both arms flapping as he waves up at Ace on the stairs, who almost stumbles on his first step down. His face is just a touch pink, holding a finger to his lips to try and get Luffy to take it down a notch, bending quickly to snatch up his robe from the steps.

A useless wish, since Luffy claps over his own head, still beaming when he yells again, “Happy Solstice, Ace!!!”

Zoro catches the way Ace’s mouth moves, a laugh that he can’t hear from here over the clamor of the crowd, a small shake of his head, and then *his* voice, booming, carrying over the loud festival goers and the music, fond,

“Happy Solstice, Luffy!”

“Oi, both you idiots, keep it down over here,” Sabo’s voice appears from the other side of the platform, and Zoro turns.

The blonde is dressed similar to Ace, all black, gold embellishments, red beads and gold jewelry. His usually curled blonde hair is pushed back, gelled into a style off his forehead and Zoro notices a scar near his hairline for the first time.

Ace is practically skipping down the last few steps three at a time, smile growing wider, handing off the bow to a guard at the bottom of the palace steps who takes it with a respectful bend of his head.

“Sabo! It’s almost time!”

“Mm. The dancers will finish when the sun has gone down entirely, and then it’s our turn. Nice shooting by the way,” the blonde hooks Ace around the neck, a clatter of bracelets and necklaces as they jostle against one another, Sabo’s fist digging into the top of Ace’s head.

“Like I’ve ever missed a shot in *years*? Can you even recall the last time I missed?”

Luffy snickers, twisting at the waist and practically hanging off the edge of the platform. All of the guards in white tense like Luffy’s about to jump off.

“I can! When Ace–”

“*Sssshhut it*!! I was like, fourteen, that doesn’t count! You’re lucky I can’t go over there and smack you, you little–”

“Alright, alright, you two,” Sabo cackles, a hand on Ace’s chest as he dramatically holds him back, lunging at Luffy when he sticks his tongue out.

Smiling, Zoro leans back on a hand, relaxing a little with the atmosphere the three brothers bring just from their casual bickering. If he pretends, he can almost imagine that they’re all here to enjoy the festival as friends. Of course, minus the royal guard that’s posted around them. Hard to ignore really, and a little in the way…

The sky is only growing darker as time passes, and the flames from the massive bonfire light up the entire space and crowd of people as if it were still daytime.

“Ace and Sabo started doing this cool show,” Luffy whips around, eyes lit up as he smiles at Zoro. He watches the two older brothers making their way down to the fire, curious as they go.

“Why not join them one year? Sure it could be arranged, give the priests a good talking to and–”

“I’ve never been able to leave this platform,” Luffy cuts in, scent souring, and the sparkle in his eye dulls, picking at the gold hems around his ankles, “It’ll never happen. Too much dumb stuff like *liability* and danger…”

Luffy looks out at the crowd of people just a few feet down the steps from them, so close and yet a world away from him. Zoro can see the resolution in his gaze, that he’s tried and tried and tried for his own freedom so many times and the tight oppression of those damn priests under the excuse of safety and worship is smothering him.

“Just having this much is okay. Being able to see it all. When I was smaller I could only watch from up there, couldn’t even leave the top step of the palace. I can hear the people, watch them dance and be happy and I can smell all the yummy food they make,” Luffy’s mouth moves into a smile, but it doesn’t reach his eyes, and a knife blade twists in Zoro’s chest, “when I’m lucky, I would get an Alpha quiet enough and I could imagine that I’m down there, among them,” Luffy closes his eyes, “I can taste the meat and can feel the fire against my skin, people against my back as we dance…”

The crowd suddenly erupts into more cheers, laughter, clapping. Zoro forces himself to look away from Luffy’s horribly woeful face, towards the fire where Ace and Sabo are now standing.

Just like that, the dull mood is gone like a splash of water. Luffy gasps, leaning close and patting Zoro’s knee before he tugs at his skirts.

“This is what I was talking about! Zoro!”

He looks but only at Luffy’s poking insistence that he does when Zoro tries to talk to Luffy more.

There’s no denying that the spectacle is pretty, just like everything else about this festival, grand and beautiful in reflection of the sun and its patron deity they worship.

Ace and Sabo both wield different instruments, ends on fire, but they’re moving— dancing— in tandem in a way that is hard to look away from.

Ace holds what looks to be two lengths of chain or rope, it’s hard to tell where Zoro is sitting, but the ends of them are lit with balls of flame. Sabo holds a staff with both hands giving it a fancy twirl behind his back before tossing it up into the air, over his head, and catching it without either flaming end burning anyone.

Luffy claps his praise with each catch and throw Ace and Sabo do, his mood seemingly snapped back to his cheerful, bright self as fast as it had slipped.

The two older brothers make their way around the pyre once, full of tricks and footwork and throws of their fire. It’s hard to look away from, like Ace and Sabo are commanding the flames themselves from their hands. Zoro would call it witchcraft if he believed in such things.

Ace and Sabo orbit the pyre again, and a third final time before they both toss their flames high, arcing up over the grand flames before they drop down again, where Ace catches the staff and Sabo the dual chains of fireballs.

As the rows and rows of people around the fire surge into applause and cheers and whistles, the air among the people’s heads explodes with color.

Gunpowder flares, powdery explosions of red and yellow and white. Some of the popped off flares are filled with confetti or petals that begin to float in the heated air around the flames. Zoro feels any sort of commentary on how wondrous it all is die in his throat.

He can't just *sit here* the rest of the night. Until whenever the festival is supposed to end, and he has a strong feeling this will continue until daybreak.

Zoro looks at Luffy, who isn't paying him any attention now as he sways to the drums around them, the energy of the people, the dance of the flames.

It builds, and Zoro decides it's now or never. There are flames in his chest, and Zoro will not extinguish them.

It might just be his heartbeat, nerves, but the drums are louder and the bass of them pound in Zoro's chest. The energy around them is intoxicating, cheers and chanting to the joy and festivities around.

It's difficult to hear himself at all in all of this. His own thoughts of how much *trouble* he's about to get them into.

He looks to his side to make sure Luffy is still there. To *see* him.

Luffy's eyes are alight with the flames that dance around them, the bonfire that grows with the thrall of people dancing around it together, around and around like the cycles of the sun. Where Luffy should be, not here.

A few heads turn when they notice him rising, Zoro pays them no attention and gets to his feet. The guards look at him with an equal mixture of fear, nervousness, curiosity. He's gotten Luffy's attention now too when he boldly steps off the wooden platform, now a step lower.

Zoro faces Luffy and bows his head. His fingers touch his brow, his nose, his lips, and he offers them up with a small raise of his palm towards Luffy. The devoted greeting he has watched the priests and worshipers bow to Luffy enough times that he gets it right even if it's his first time offering it.

Luffy seems surprised, wide eyed, but curious. Zoro stays on the second step from the top, bent on one knee, and leaves his hand open for Luffy to take.

Even if there were a hush of voices talking about what he is doing, they go unheard as the music and cheers of the festival continue around them.

Deafening.

Empowering.

He doesn't need words to meet Luffy's eyes and tell him to trust him. To take his hand and follow.

Warm fingers press into his, gliding across his palm and then squeezing. Solid, strong, full of life.

Zoro rises to his feet and before anyone can interrupt him, he turns to drag Luffy down the steps, quickly, two at a time. He thinks he can hear the peal of Luffy's bright and startled laughter over his shoulder and the fading alarmed shouts of the guards. He doesn't stop to check if they're chasing until they have entered the thrall of the crowd around the fire.

There's a deafening *boom* overhead, an explosion like Zoro has never heard before. Maybe the guards have some weapon, or the heavens have taken Zoro's boldness for offense and it is the last thing he hears before being struck down.

No, the night sky erupts in a shining burst of color. One after the other.

Fireworks.

Zoro has never seen them before and they're beautiful, full of colors and light that he never thought could streak the night sky. Luffy's hand tightens in his and he hears him cheering, soon drowned out by the people around him celebrating and exclaiming in awe at the next series of fireworks.

A spectacle, but after the initial handful of explosions, the fireworks die down into sparse sparklers shot into the air.

Determined, he pushes on.

Zoro weaves between the bodies to make sure they're uncomfortably close to the fire like it calls to him. He has chased the warmth of flames before in Luffy's touches, this is no different. The heat of the pyre is stifling this close, as they break the ring of people closest to the burning embers.

The guards are nowhere to be seen, no robes or veils of white among the flower-bursts of color from the people around them.

Luffy is moving fast, stumbling bare feet, sweaty palms and when Zoro comes to a stop, Luffy barrels right into his chest. He takes the weight of the omega easily, takes the momentum to take them into a slow spin to test his own feet.

Zoro really had nothing to worry about, as Luffy immediately takes to the tune of the bodies around them, holds onto Zoro as he begins to dance along. They keep moving, half steps and sways between one turn and the next, heat on Zoro's back and then his face. Figuring each other out like this is the first time they've truly met. Luffy's next laugh gets drowned out in the swell of music and people cheering, singing, laughing.

Suddenly letting go, Luffy flits around Zoro quickly, beaming and bright in the face. His arms come up over his head, curling and swaying like smoke billowing up to the clouds. The flames dance in his eyes, casting a glow against his skin. Zoro feels drawn to him, pulled in by the gravity of His Sun.

They have made it halfway around the flaming pyre by now and are swiftly keeping up with the crowd of dancers and people. There's a few shocked glances at them Zoro catches when Luffy's excitement means they bump into people, but it's easily brushed off, and surprisingly, the people accept Luffy among them without a single question or hint of fear that he is no longer up on some pedestal to watch.

"YOU'RE CRAZY!" Luffy shouts over the roar of the festival and suddenly slips his fingers down Zoro's arm, pulls at his hand, pulls up, adjusting their grip.

Mirroring the couples around them as the music changes into something different, a new song, but just as fast tempoed, just as happy and rhythmic and bright.

Luffy brings Zoro's hand up to the level of their ears, hovering in the air before he unlaces their fingers. Their wrists come together, the warm gold of their bracelets clinking together. Zoro *knows* this one. Spent days practicing how to get the steps right, how to let his body naturally flow into the rhythm rather than step on his own two feet.

He eyes Luffy's fingers, the dark stain of his intricate mehndi, the smooth skin under the gold chains, the bangles and beads. Small. Or at least smaller than Zoro's that hovers near. Paler, sword calloused, faint silver-scars on his knuckles from years of working with blades, the gold on his own wrists.

Zoro reaches down to hold the thick layers of fabric away from his knees as Luffy spins them, finds himself smiling back at Luffy.

They orbit each other, connected by the gentle press of their wrists, once, twice, three times before the drums beat loudly in a half-beat and they switch hands with a skip of their feet. The smoke of the fire and the bundles of incense that burn around them don't allow him to pick up on the mingling of their scents.

No matter how badly he wants to catch it, knowing that their scents are mixing with the contact of their scent glands together like this even under the number of bangles and bracelets is enough. The smoke of the fire is enough to burn Luffy into his brain.

Changing his step, Luffy bumps into his front before he follows along, adjusting his feet to step back and allow Zoro to lead instead.

Pressing, hips swaying, stepping into Luffy's space and spinning them in time with the circling of people. Their hips bump again, a solid pressure of Luffy's hipbone into his as Zoro spins them quickly enough to throw off his balance. Luffy trusts him, doesn't even flinch as he begins to fall and Zoro's hand catches him behind the waist swiftly.

Luffy's head drops back and Zoro can't even hear the laugh that comes from him over the music and the roar of the flames. Oh. How he aches to lean in, if he could just press his ear to Luffy's chest and hear his joy from the source, the pounding of his heartbeat, the pull of his breath.

Fabric sways against his ankles and Zoro steps backwards, acquiescing to Luffy as he switches their hands again and steps in, takes the lead back.

They circle each other once more, and again, and again, around the flames, weaving between the other people dancing, and Zoro prays to any higher being that will listen, that Luffy can hear how Zoro's heart is pounding, that Luffy feels the people against his back and the flames at his skin like he had wished for. That just for one night, Luffy's joy is genuine.

They must have made their way around the flames at least seven times now, when Luffy's other hand slips around Zoro's waist to tug him closer. The skin on skin is *burning*. And for once, Zoro welcomes the lick of flames. If Luffy wishes to dip him back and drop him into the pyre like a sacrifice, Zoro could honestly die a happy man.

He is surprised when Luffy suddenly pulls him down by a grip he takes on the chains across his chest, yanking him down by the necklaces. Luffy claims his lips roughly, passionately, and only lets go once he has sunk his teeth into Zoro's bottom lip hard enough to make him wince.

They have stopped dancing, as Luffy has pulled them uncomfortably close to the flames. The people around them continue though, spinning in orbit of their Sun. The drums beating are rivaled by the pounding of Zoro's heart, he is certain. He really cannot tell the difference right now, which is which.

Luffy is speaking to him, he can see his mouth moving, but the music is too loud now, too many voices cheering, singing, yelling around them. Thousands of people around them. Luffy looks excited about something, so bright that Zoro swears he is glowing. Luffy's head turns, looking around them, lips still moving as he chatters away.

The omega's hair is mussed from their dancing, dark curls wild atop his head. His face is flushed, color that blushes his face and neck. Zoro follows the color, notes the sheen of sweat that glistens over Luffy's tan skin, pooling in the base of his throat, dripping across his collarbones, down his bare chest that rises and falls with Luffy's quick breathing.

Zoro would feel embarrassed at how quickly he gets hard, if he could even make the dedication of brainpower to anything other than simply taking in the sight of Luffy.

The flecks of gold on Luffy's skin catch in the light of the flames and seem to flicker across his skin. The red and orange gemstones twinkle against the gold, catching this way and that when Luffy moves.

Overcome with desire so strongly it aches, Zoro takes Luffy's waist in his hands, holds the omega still and is met halfway into leaning into Luffy for a kiss, interrupting the words that Zoro still can't make out. Luffy's hands frame his throat, slide up into his hair, cupping the back of his neck, the side of his cheek with a brush of a warm thumb.

Zoro growls into the kiss, want fire-hot in his veins, only burning brighter when he feels the rumble of Luffy's mirthful laughter in his mouth, followed by a slick tongue. He breaks away only because he is getting dizzy with the need for air, and the start of a pricking burn against his back.

They've stepped too close to the flames.

Luffy tugs him, sweet mouth moving as he says something again, and Zoro *still* can't hear him. He tries to lean in, bring his ear closer to Luffy's mouth. They move back into the crowd of celebrations and the people dance around them easily. Moving around them as they continue to circle the fire to the beat of drums.

Zoro can faintly hear Luffy's laughter again as it pitches louder, the way his fingers squeeze against him, holding on tightly, touch warmer than the flames at his back. Zoro bends again, towards that warmth, catches Luffy's mouth even in the midst of his giggling.

There are hands in his hair now, bracelets that knock against his earrings, the soft tink of metal ringing, teeth in his bottom lip and Luffy growling. Playful. Just one bite, enough to make Zoro gasp before an arm around his waist swings him in a sharp half circle. He almost loses his balance, his own foot catching his other ankle, thrown off his center of gravity—

Luffy *dips* him.

Surprisingly strong, not a single muscle trembling as he gracefully bends Zoro backwards, supports his weight entirely, gives Zoro enough time to look back and see the world upside down, a great

crackling fire and happy people twirling around it like floating shadows, before he's yanked upright again and his worldview is once again Luffy.

They stumble together this time, as Zoro steps in and Luffy takes a few clumsy ones backwards. Luffy is still laughing, following Zoro's lead now as he takes them a bit further back away from the pyre. Zoro can feel a drop of sweat racing down his back, his entire skin prickling with it from the heat.

It's easily been an hour, maybe even two. They keep a safer distance now from the bonfire, but their dance continues. Circling each other in the same step that they circle around the flames, following the crowd, following the drums. Luffy doesn't look like he's tired, or even close to wanting to slow down.

He's not once tried to stop them, or tried to talk to Zoro about this. No fear. No worry. No sadness.

Zoro's alpha settles under his skin, melted wax between his bones, satisfied that he's made Luffy smile, managed to get Luffy to enjoy his own gods damned festival. How ridiculous, Zoro thinks, to keep the one person this whole night is meant for away from the very life flames that were supposed to honor him.

The initial rush of adrenaline has worn down, the high from dancing so much, and Zoro's muscles are sore in a good way that he knows will leave him softly aching tomorrow.

At some point, during their swaying and dancing, the bodies around them have pushed them out towards the peripheral circles of the crowd. Closer to the rows of stalls. Zoro feels the clench of his empty stomach, especially when the smoke of cooking meat and sweets begins to be noticeably stronger here, unable to be smothered by the burn of the pyre.

There's an old man that catches his eye and he nods in greeting at Zoro. Of course he caught the way the man's face had shown shock at who exactly was clinging to Zoro's arm. The way he looks around, Zoro is worried that he's looking for guards to call and give their location away. Nerves start to pickle under his skin, especially when the old man starts to hobble away from his stall.

Fuck. Zoro has to get them away and—

The man holds out a fist, holding almost a dozen skewers, each wooden stick stacked with seven or eight fat cubes of mouth wateringly charred meat. Zoro takes them with surprise and doesn't get to hold them for long when Luffy slams into his back. Zoro can't tell if that's drool dripping off his shoulder or his own sweat.

"We aren't supposed to eat until morning!" Luffy says over his shoulder. He sounds a little alarmed, but also upset about this fact.

The old man has gone back to his stall, a smile on his face as he turns the skewers of meat over the flames, preparing more for the people that stop by for only long enough to take their own share. When Zoro catches the old man looking at them again, he just nods at him and looks away again.

"The sun is down. It's technically not the Solstice anymore." Zoro turns to face Luffy, offering him half of the bunch. Luffy hesitates to take them, eyes the meat with obvious want in his eyes though.

Zoro brings two skewers to his mouth and completely cleans the sticks off, chewing the mouthful of meat graciously right in Luffy's face. There's nothing much to them, but the meat is so tender

and fatty and melting in his mouth and gods it's been a long time since he ate, it tastes heavenly.

"Fine, if you don't, I'll eat em all. I'm *starving*."

Zoro eating first is all the encouragement needed, though. That and the threat of his treat being eaten before he even gets a taste. Luffy snatches up the skewers Zoro had held out for him, and follows suit with scarfing two full skewers into his mouth entirely. His eyes squeeze shut as he chews, bending at his knees for a second.

It's too loud, but Zoro is quite confident Luffy was moaning over the food. Reasonable reaction. It's so good.

Really, who would know they've broken this stupid fast? There's too many bodies around them, too many people celebrating and dancing in a wave of feet and arms and flowing robes and skirts. So easy to get lost among them all. Who would even be watching?

Zoro makes sure they stay tucked into the people at the edges of the dancing, close to the food stalls so he can occasionally reach out and sneak more for Luffy. Another skewer of meat, a handful of candy, sugar-dusted dough, candied nuts. Every single person behind the stalls happily offer them over when they see Luffy.

He has no doubt the two of them could clean the entire festival clean of their stock, but in one of the furthest stalls from the palace, in a darker, cooler corner of shade in the buildings furthest out from the palace, the vendors are offering *drinks*.

Ale, mead, mulled wine.

Heavens above, the first cup of wine he's able to down is so *sweet* and perfect he wants to stop dancing and stay there until the sun came back up. Luffy takes a cup, downs it in a few gulps, and his face pinches as he sticks his tongue out.

Zoro can't help but laugh at him.

"You can drink something *else*, I'll get it for you."

Zoro scans the lines and stacks of barrels and such, finally sees a small group of kids toddling away with cups sloshing with liquid. Zoro tugs Luffy to them and preens when the fruit-laced drinks suit Luffy's cravings better. He drinks and drinks and drinks, finally slowing down when a nervous woman at the stall has a stack of empty cups in her arms from Luffy switching out each time.

It's citrusy, clean and bright when Luffy snatches Zoro in for a kiss. Still, he thinks he will stick with his wine thank you very much.

Luffy catches his hand again, lacing their fingers, and starts to weave them through the crowd of people like he's on a mission. It's not any quieter as the festival is still in full swing, but when Luffy rocks up onto his toes, arms around Zoro's shoulder to tug him at the waist, lips against his ear now, he can hear him speaking finally.

"I love you, Zoro."

Ah.

The world around him *burns*.

Flames and laughter and Luffy.

Luffy.

Zoro turns into the nuzzling, catches him in another kiss, nipping at his lips even when Luffy starts giggling again. So brought and mirthful and Zoro doesn't even find himself annoyed by it. He's never been so happy to hear someone laugh his ears off before.

He's never felt rhythmic before. Has spent his entire life trained for tranquility, poise, restraint, and Zoro can't stop whatever is rushing his blood in this moment, the infectious sort of infatuation Luffy pulls out of him.

"Dance with me some more," he says, knowing Luffy will say yes.

"Mm, all night." Luffy hops slightly, arms around Zoro's neck and he carries the momentum, spins Luffy clean off his feet as he begins to march back towards the spinning couples around the bonfire.

Luffy's laughter peals through the crowd of people, the cheering, the drums, the music, the crackle of the fire. As they complete another rotation around the bonfire, fireworks light up the sky again. Zoro can't help but get caught up in it, finds himself laughing too as they begin to dance in orbit once more.

It's not all night, as he promised.

Somewhere in their *hours* of dancing— Zoro's body light and scalding from the flames, belly full, and head a little fluffy from the alcohol— Luffy had pulled him through the crowds again.

He'd trailed them back to the steps of the palace, where Zoro noticed the guards were no longer anywhere to be seen and he wasn't sure if they were still among the crowds looking for them still or what.

All of his focus had been on Luffy, who was dripping sweat and out of breath as he bolted up the stairs with Zoro's hand tight in his, gold clinking together as they raced up to the palace. They had reached the top out of breath and ready to collapse. Luffy had fallen into his arms with a giggle.

"I love you," Luffy panted and Zoro could hear him easier now, alone and away from the crowds, and it felt just as earth shattering as before. While there wasn't the explosion of fireworks again, Zoro swore he could hear them, feel them in his chest, see the colors burst as he heard Luffy say it again.

He's too aware of the lack of weight around his throat, that his gold collar was no longer any barrier to Luffy's fangs his his throat. And fuck did Zoro *need*.

"You promised," Zoro whispers, gnawing hunger under his skin much deeper than the ache of his stomach being empty.

Grey eyes look him over, glittering, curved at the edges at the smile seemingly permanently plastered on Luffy's face now. Luffy doesn't say anything as he adjusts his fingers, pulling Zoro along. Weaving through eerily empty hallways of stone and marble.

To his room, Zoro realizes.

For some reason, he imagined Luffy would take him to the temple again, where he had first knelt before Luffy and became his Alpha. To make it an official and important thing.

Instead, Zoro is being ruthlessly shoved into Luffy's bed, nest full of pillows and fur and velvet. Easy for Zoro to melt into and watch Luffy slam the large wood doors closed behind himself, eyes suddenly aflame.

"Off. All of it," he demands, and Zoro is already reaching for the hems at his waist.

Graciously, Zoro *doesn't* rip the many layers of silk and red and embroidery, the layers of skirts and the chains, one by one as they fall to the floor. Luffy's crawling in after him from the foot of the bed, guided only by the moonlight coming in through the dozens of windows in his room. No servant had come in to light candles for Luffy's room yet.

There's a thundering boom outside again, and the fireworks cast a glittering burst of pinkgoldpurple into the room before fading out, followed by another large firework spraying gold and white.

Zoro is used to it now, the festival carrying on somewhere far below as Luffy settles in between his legs again. Natural. Zoro feels that he'll be getting used to this, the strong, sturdy omega between his thighs, his hands fever hot as they slip up his thighs starting from his knees.

Luffy's eyes roam, like he's determining just where he's going to start on Zoro to eat him whole. Zoro wiggles the last dainty piece of fabric off his ankle kicked off the bed before he brings his foot against Luffy's hip.

He pushes, heel against the omega's hipbone, keeps him from bending in for a kiss that Zoro could see coming from a mile away. Luffy scowls, the gold on his hand clinking when they connect with the anklets on Zoro where he grabs.

"Can't ask me to do something you won't. Take em off," Zoro pushes with his foot again, catches a fold of silk with his toes and pulls at it.

"I can tell Zoro whatever and he'll listen. You *like* being a good boy," Luffy simpers, but he's leaning back to start the work of getting his skirts and pants off too. He grins like he's won when he notices Zoro's slight blush.

If he puts it that way, it just makes him sound *easy*. Zoro thinks he should have had better control of himself and his reactions every time Luffy had praised him before this. Because now it's being *weaponized* against him, which… is entirely unfair, considering he doesn't know anything that makes Luffy squirm or blush.

There's no in. Luffy is so sure of himself and everything he does, says, thinks about. Luffy doesn't get embarrassed about his lust or how Zoro turns him on. The casual confidence is painfully attractive, and Zoro decides he's just got to let this one go.

He leans back into the pillows, watches when Luffy finally gets himself entirely naked save for the dozens of pieces of necklaces and bracelets and waist chains, watches the way Luffy's cock bobs fully hard in the air. All that gold and his cock is the most precious thing enticing Zoro's attention.

"See something you want?" Luffy says, a hint of teasing in his voice.

Zoro almost hisses at him, embarrassed, but is distracted at the way Luffy is hobbling back closer to him, walking on his knees on the soft mattress. He takes Zoro by the knees and easily pulls his legs apart.

"Well, *I* wanna be inside Zoro again," Luffy's hips slot against him, hard length right between his ass where he grinds the underside of himself against Zoro's hole, dropping open mouthed kisses along Zoro's stomach, up to his chest, before he opens and clamps his teeth around one of Zoro's nipples.

"*oW!*" Zoro grabs Luffy by the hair, tugs hard. He squirms when it makes Luffy's teeth scrape, bright pain in his chest before Luffy pops off with a line of spit.

"Liar. I felt Zoro twitch," Luffy pants and the way his eyes glance between them, Zoro doesn't need to make any guesses to what he means. Fuck, it was Zoro's own dick, he felt *himself* twitch, the way his cock jumped against Luffy's belly trapped between their sweat-slicked skin from the sting of pain.

"Zoro doesn't want me to bite him anymore?" Luffy turns into a whine, a squirm of his mouth into something like a pout, batting his lashes up at Zoro.

Fuck, the little *devil*.

The whole reason for this is specifically for Luffy's bite. Finally, *finally*, a claim.

He doesn't take to the teasing very well, even though Luffy knows just how to rile him up, what way to push his buttons, get under his skin, make him hot all over and want to hide all at the same time.

"Can't do that with my nipple in your mouth, can you?"

"Eeeh? I can too," and Luffy goes to demonstrate, all Zoro sees are glittering little omega fangs, a slick pink tongue, ready for blood the way he lunges for Zoro's chest again, taking advantage of the way Zoro's grip had slacked from his hair during their talking.

Scrambling, Zoro catches him, both hands under his chin, in the nick of time. Zoro drags Luffy up, swooping him into a kiss easily and throws himself bodily to the side. They roll, and Luffy goes right into the plush of the nest with a breathy gasp, one Zoro licks out of his teeth, bites for, presses.

Luffy moans when he suckles at Zoro's tongue, going all bone soft and melty on his back. He pins Luffy down and kisses him until his chest burns. Luffy tastes like sugar and fruit and meat. Sweet. He draws back, barely an inch, just so he can catch his breath. His next breaths come with the scent of smoke, clinging to Luffy's skin and hair, an undercurrent of hyacinths and sugary syrup.

As soon as he's not distracted however, Luffy's hands are moving, strong where they pull at Zoro's waist, his hips, practically bodily moving the alpha on top of him, right into his lap. Luffy's cheek bulges where he pushes his tongue against it inside his mouth, eyes focused and dark.

Zoro's worried about his weight for a moment, that he might just crush Luffy's hips under him, tries to keep himself balanced on his knees—

"*Sit*," Luffy growls at him, heat in his throat and Zoro drops before he can get his next breath.

Luffy's cock sits between his cheeks, throbbing softly when Luffy's hands slide from Zoro's hips around to his stomach, up, under his chest. The omega's cock is smaller than Zoro's but no less intimidating. He should gag himself for how badly he *wants*, just because it's Luffy.

"Zoro listens so well," Luffy mumbles, and his fingertips, dark with henna, playfully drag across pale skin, unmarred and smooth, reverent. Zoro doesn't know what to say or how to feel about sitting over top Luffy like this while the omega looks up at Zoro like *he's* the deity between them.

The gold chains on Zoro's chest are warm, a soft touch of contrast to the softness of Luffy's fingers as he plays with them, touching underneath, tugging them this way and that to get around the metal.

Expecting Luffy to go for his nipples again, Zoro brings his hand up and catches one of Luffy's wandering ones, not thinking as he brings it up to his mouth, kissing the back of Luffy's knuckles, one after the next before Luffy hums. The fingers shift in his hold, press at his lips as a want for an in, rather than allowing the affection.

Zoro opens, spit gathering on his tongue, which he soaked Luffy's fingers with, doesn't try to swallow any of it. The mess of his own drool starts to drip down Luffy's fingers. He pulls them free, arm slipping around him and fumbling by touch to get between his cheeks, no warning or preamble in fitting those wet fingers inside Zoro.

He still feels like he's relaxed from last night, their first time. Zoro's brain flickers through the memory fast and in brief here and theres of breaths and fingers and mouths and cock. Full, full, full —

Luffy's genuinely inside of him again when he gasps and breaks out of his concentration. He'd been trying to stay relaxed, as Luffy's fingers slicked inside of him all messy and impatient. It doesn't hurt, but fuck it's *tight*, Luffy feels—

Zoro groans, folding himself over Luffy, hands clenching in plush pillows and soft silk and velvet. Fuck, it's good. But Luffy's hands are on his hips, over his belly, one on his chest, pushing him away.

"Mnn, Zoro sit up. Don't– Yeah, *yesh*–" Luffy's head drops back with a sigh.

Zoro rolls his hips as he sits up again, straightens his back, angling himself to push down onto Luffy's cock and bounce him down into the bed with his weight. Fuck that was— Luffy's cock hits something inside of him that Zoro chases after, struggles to get that angle again because he can't get Luffy to hold still.

Zoro sits up on his knees properly like Luffy had told him to, but he doesn't stop rocking his hips. He feels more in control when he's over Luffy like this, his alpha under his skin unbothered at the way Luffy's cock is splitting him open, pressing deeper than his body should allow but when he spreads his thighs and angles himself better—

"Hnnh, Zoro~" Luffy whines, and his fingers are squeezing at his hips again, eyes dark and hazy as they focus on where Zoro is in his lap. The scent of heat is getting stronger, dizzying, and Zoro

doesn't even realize he'd folded down to kiss the omega's slack mouth until he's already there.

It's more *licking* than a genuine kiss, not that Zoro minds it, what with all the sounds Luffy is making, guttural, wild, pitching into a gasp as he turns his head away quickly and warbles,

"M'g'nna cum, oh fuck, *ohh* Zoro."

Not like the warning did him any good, he was still in the middle of it when Zoro felt Luffy's body tensing, cock pulsing inside of him.

He decides to just ride it out, watching Luffy's hair in wild, sweaty cowlicks on the pillows, the way the gold of his jewelry seems to almost glow with the moonlight. He's so *pretty*, lips parted in the throes of his pleasure, glistening with spit from their kiss.

But when his eyes open, Zoro isn't expecting the glitter of *tears* in his eyes, a worrying, distressed pinch between his brows.

He pulls off and when Luffy's cock leaves his body, that seems to only make it worse, a small, unhappy noise in Luffy's throat before the first tear drops off his lashes.

"What's wrong? Luffy? Are you okay?"

He can't smell blood, can't smell any painful distress. It's just the bonfire smoke and Luffy's heat, sweet with the softly growing swell of sour— Fear.

"My… My heat. I don't want to… I'm not ready yet," Luffy warbles, becoming soft in Zoro's hands where he holds his face and sweeps off his tears. Luffy's hands come up to wrap around Zoro's shoulders.

"Don't want to lose Zoro," he whispers, as he fiercely tugs Zoro into his neck and hugs him like he might actually disappear if he doesn't hold him as tight as he could. It's starting to hurt a little, one of Luffy's bracelets is pinching him…

The pinch of pain isn't nearly noticeable as the ache in his chest. He turns, kissing across Luffy's wet face, the salt of tears, sweat, finds his mouth while Luffy starts hiccuping about not wanting his heat to start.

"It's okay," he tells Luffy, feels the truth of it in his bones. He'll be okay, he'll stay at Luffy's side no matter what happens, his heat, Nika, whatever.

"I told you before I'm not going anywhere. I won't leave you."

"Zoro *should*," he gasps, "I don't remember my heats, I can't stop–"

"Shh. Luffy. It's okay."

He shuffles, the tinkle of their jewelry clattering, the blankets rustling, and it's quite easy for Zoro to sit them both up, for Luffy to almost collapse into his chest, arms tight and face still wet.

Zoro hates it, doesn't want Luffy upset because of him. He had done so well earlier, had Luffy smiling so bright and full of laughter, and now it's only the small, sickening sniffles and hiccups from him trying to muffle his own crying.

“I still want you,” he says, kissing the small scar under Luffy’s eye, “I’m still yours. Want your claim, want you to claim me. Your heat doesn’t scare me. *You* don’t scare me. I made a promise, remember? I told you I wasn’t dying. I meant it.”

Luffy looks up at him from where he’s still buried in Zoro’s chest, eyes big, but at the least he’s stopped crying. Zoro rewards that with a kiss, aching when he feels Luffy’s bottom lip trembling under his own.

“Bet we’re close enough to your heat that if I bit you it would stick,” he says, almost like an afterthought, trying to steer Luffy’s mind. Most claiming bites for omegas could be faded, if made outside of a heat; an omega could distance themselves from the alpha and the claim could be faded to nothing. In order to prevent any accidental claims, biology favored the omega’s side. Most of the time.

It just meant that mates wanting to claim each other had to time their bites right.

It didn’t matter if it stuck or not, Zoro wasn’t going to *leave*. He wouldn’t ever be away from Luffy long enough for a bite to ever get the chance to begin fading. And even if, the impossible if, he would claim him again and again and however many times it took to *stay*.

Zoro’s fingers are gentle, sweeping some of the sweaty hair from Luffy’s neck, adjusting the gold chains, finding the tiny clasps on each one and starting the slow process of removing them. Chain after chain until Luffy’s neck and shoulders were nothing but smooth sun kissed skin.

Zoro left each necklace and chain of beads and gems and all the glittering pretty things on the floor, replacing them with his mouth, kisses to go around Luffy’s throat instead.

Luffy’s hands pushed through his hair, settling at the back of his head and keeping him held close, even though Zoro could still feel the faint tremble of his fingertips. His lips found the swollen scent glands at Luffy’s nape, and he craned his neck to scrape his teeth over it.

The omega shivered, and Zoro pressed his hips down feeling the way Luffy’s cock throbbed just from the tease of fangs. His gums ached with how his alpha canines dropped, strong, sharp, and ready.

Zoro’s hands brace against Luffy’s back, behind a shoulder as the other hugs Luffy in by the curve in his lower back. Luffy smelled *delicious*. Sweet and warm and *fuck* Zoro could taste the arousal from the scent gland itself when he licked across it. Dragging it out, making sure…

Luffy’s nails scratched across his scalp, over his shoulder, and the brace of his thighs around Zoro’s waist made him grunt.

“Now,” Luffy whined, *commanded*.

Zoro left a kiss against the unmarred skin, pretty hyacinths and sunshine, opened his mouth, and sunk his fangs *in*.

Zoro doesn’t even get to hear the way Luffy gasps, so enraptured with the flood of endorphins, blood in his mouth, a heat breaking out under his skin suddenly, and then wet shooting up across his belly between them. Zoro stayed, groaning when Luffy’s hands turned loose but still clasping him there encouragingly against the bite, and Luffy’s head tipped to the side, giving him more room.

It was like everything *perfect* clicked into place. He could feel it as sure as the earth under his feet when he meditated, like a purest connection to the way the world around him breathed, the way that one could tap into that breath if they focused, let go…

Luffy was slack when Zoro released him, keeping him in his arms as he lowered him back to the bed, realizing that Luffy had cum just from the bite as their bodies came apart. Luffy's hands were still against his skin, warm and gentle as they pawed across his biceps and then his chest. There was a weight to his eyes, when Zoro caught them, but it was too distant, hazy.

"Inside," Luffy mumbled, barely a breath, and pawed his way down to Zoro's hips, tugging him between his, "Zoro. *Please*."

There wasn't even a need to try and open Luffy on his fingers, the way he was so *slick*. Zoro hesitantly angled his cock against Luffy's hole, watching the omega for any discomfort as he pushed in.

It was only as Zoro had gotten halfway that Luffy grabbed for him again, pulling, surprisingly strong as he yanked Zoro on top of him entirely, hands fumbling in the pillows as he tried to keep his balance. However, the omega was quite determined, purring as he practically pulled Zoro into himself another inch, two, finally all the way to the hilt.

He was trying his best to not cum, eyes practically rolling in his skull when Luffy's fingers scratched through his hair again, melting him like putty, balls aching and mouth full of *Luffy—*

Pain stabbed at his shoulder, sharp and blunt all the same, and he realized Luffy was *biting* him, though not in the right place. Zoro flinched when Luffy bit him again, another pierce of his little fangs a touch to the side of that first bite, and then he pulled back and moved to do it *again*.

All over his shoulders, his neck, his throat, fuckfuckfuck—

"Luffy," he whined, alpha almost rolling over in his head about getting a proper claim. Luffy was *playing* with him (he could have sworn he felt Luffy smiling against his skin when he complained). Zoro's mouth was opening for a plea, begging and a whole lot of nonsense filling his throat and brain before it came to a rushing halt.

At first it was another fumbling pitch, like he'd fallen down without being able to use his arms to catch himself; breathtaking, *a lot*, and then it was heat. *Hot*.

Luffy's claim taking root meant a solidified *mutual* bond now, and Zoro didn't know if he was gasping or cumming or even breathing as Luffy's hands held him down and his mouth locked against his neck.

Zoro's hips pressed forward, hard, rough, and Luffy let go with a gasp when his knot locked them together finally. Catching his breath took a moment, but Zoro felt like he could live in that single moment for an eternity, Luffy's body under his, arms around him, breaths against his ear, soft lips over his face blindly pressing until they found his mouth.

It could have only been a few minutes or *hours*, when Zoro felt like he was back in his own body. And even then, when he had the strength to pick his head up, to sit up with his arms, there was a constant reminder in his chest, in the back of his head, of Luffy.

Luffy, Luffy, Luffy. His heartbeat, his breath, *Life*. Alive and connected to him.

Bonded.

There were giggles in his ears, soft and light, and he opened his eyes to Luffy's mouth curved and opened around that very laughter.

"I can *feel* you," he says, staring at Zoro like he'd hung the stars.

There wasn't any need to question what he meant, because Zoro understood it *exactly*. He could sense Luffy inside of him, something stronger than his own instincts.

Luffy nuzzles at him and Zoro leaned into it, feeling sluggish and heavy when Luffy took him by the shoulders and rolled them over again in the bed. It must have been some time since the claim, Zoro noticed his knot had already gone down and with Luffy's shuffling, his cock slipped free, half hard and wet with slick and his own spend.

The sweet touches and warm hands turned into something harder, Zoro gasped when he felt Luffy entering him instead this time, swiftly taking one of his legs and pulling Zoro open. A leg over Luffy's shoulder and held there in place by a hand at his knee while Luffy's other hand wrapped around his cock.

Shuddering, Zoro tried to breathe through the overwhelming feeling of Luffy completely engulfing him, inside, outside—

"Ah– fffuck, Luffy~"

Outside the windows, Zoro could hear the clustered explosions of fireworks again, the sparkles of colors on the walls when Luffy fucked into him *deep*, knocking the bed into the wall hard enough to create their own echoing boom in the room itself. Zoro moaned, clutching at the pillows, furs, *something* to ground him as Luffy took him.

Pleasure settled through Zoro, and even though he was sure he couldn't cum again, when Luffy turned his cheek against Zoro's leg, scraping fangs over his ankle like he was thinking about biting there, he wouldn't be surprised if somehow Luffy *made* him. The omega had what felt like endless stamina, rocking into Zoro's body with his own heavy breaths and moans.

"You're *mine* now," Luffy breathed and Zoro couldn't help the strained moan spilling from his mouth when he felt Luffy cumming inside.

"*Yours*," Zoro scrambled for Luffy's touch, against the warm waist chains on Luffy's skin, fumbling as he dug his fingers into those small hips and pulled.

"'S not fair," Luffy whines, already out of breath, but continuing as he rocked his hips, thrust after thrust not slowing down or getting any more gentle, Luffy's head roll on his own shoulders as he pins the alpha with dark eyes.

"Zoro's knot is *useless*. Would be better if I had it. Could fill you up and keep you– hhn—"

Luffy's voice tapered off into muttering before it died out into a moan, and his hips stuttered. Cumming again, filling Zoro. Deliriously, Zoro thought that Luffy wouldn't be complaining so much about his knot when his heat flared up at its peak. Or would Luffy want him spread open like this still?

Fuck. Whatever he wanted. Zoro would give it.

Zoro can feel the way his breath is catching in his chest, eyes hot all of a sudden, Luffy must sense it too, and he's easing Zoro's leg off his shoulder so he can lean down and kiss him. It doesn't stop the overwhelmed single tear that rolls off Zoro's temple.

It does however ease the swirling craze in his head of *mine mine mine* and *yours yours yours*. *Mate* and *perfect* and *need*. Fuck that's weird, feeling Luffy's heat getting stronger, can smell it, taste it—

The kiss breaks when Zoro growls at the snap of pleasure when he cums. Luffy bumps their foreheads as he shakes again, practically flops himself on top of Zoro without pulling out. But not before he squishes his own hand between them, wraps his fingers around Zoro's knot and practically whines like just touching it as it starts to swell again is doing something for him.

There's so much he can feel with the fresh bond, and Zoro doesn't try to fight it. Lets the waves crash and crash and take him, floating.

Before his eyes slip shut, exhaustion winning out, Zoro hears the pop of fireworks again outside, and Luffy against his cheek. Wet from Zoro's tears or Luffy's he can't tell.

Whatever Luffy whispers to him, Zoro is asleep before he can hear it.

Chapter End Notes

comments are very, very loved and appreciated!! i hope you guys enjoyed this chapter as much as i did writing it (and daydreaming it in my brain for the past year and a half) (づ๑•ᴗ•๑)づ ♡♡♡

COMM ART THIS CHAPTER BY DEVINA THE TALENTED LOML im still in awe just staring at this piece, yall go give them all the love for this beautiful detailed piece

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